ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

AUGUST 14

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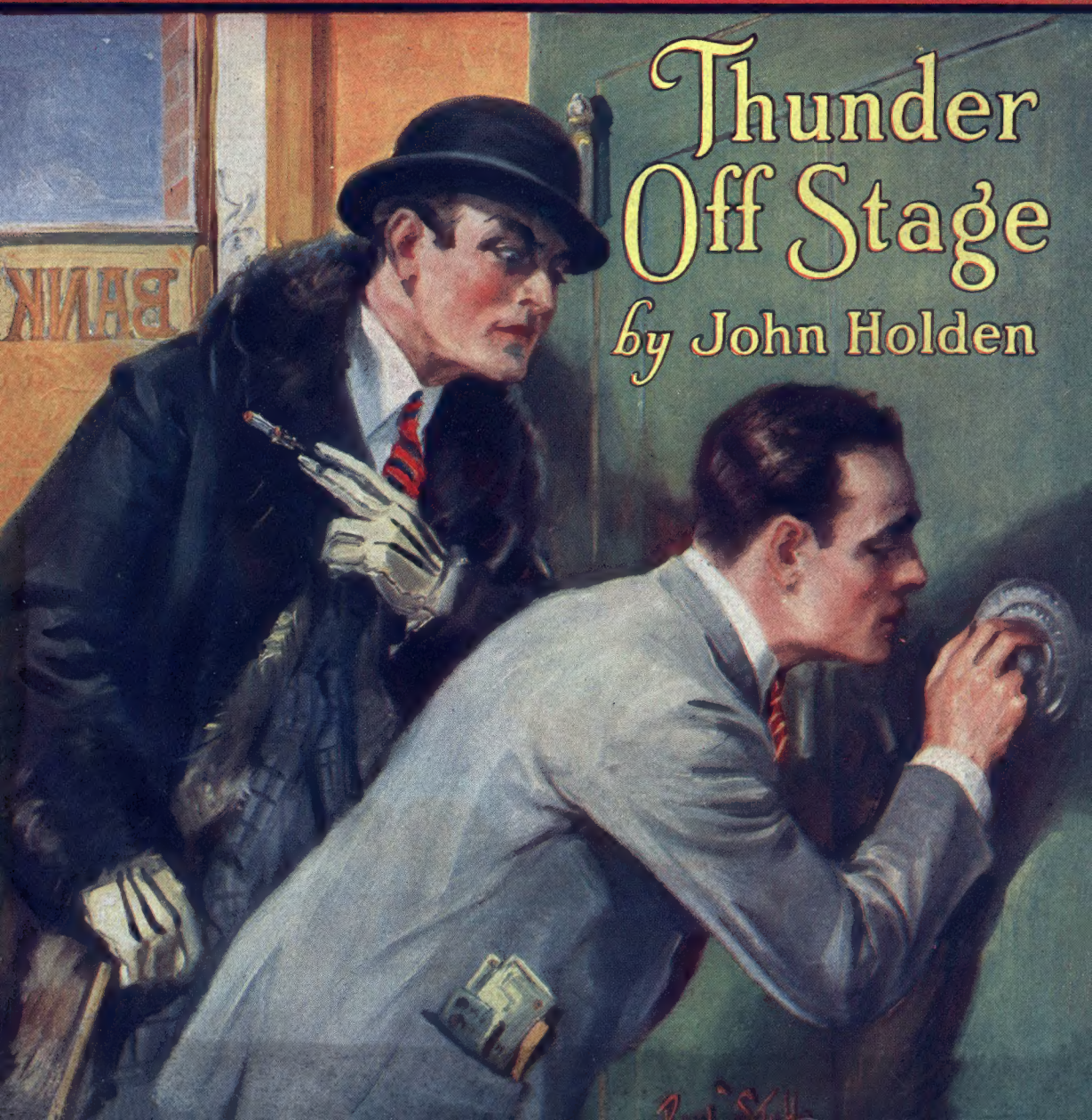

Thunder Off Stage

by John Holden

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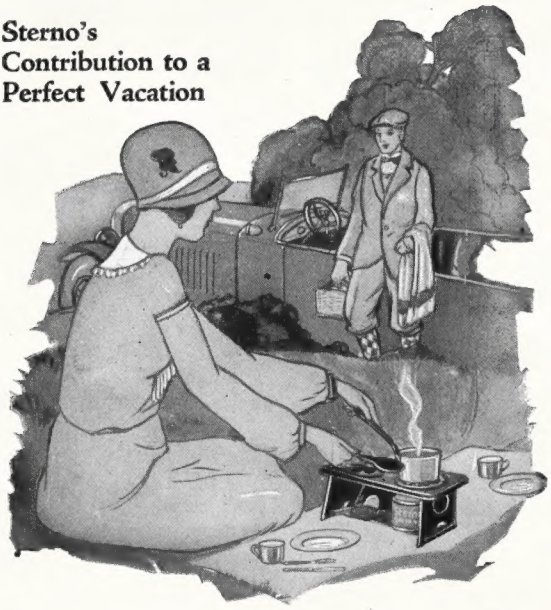

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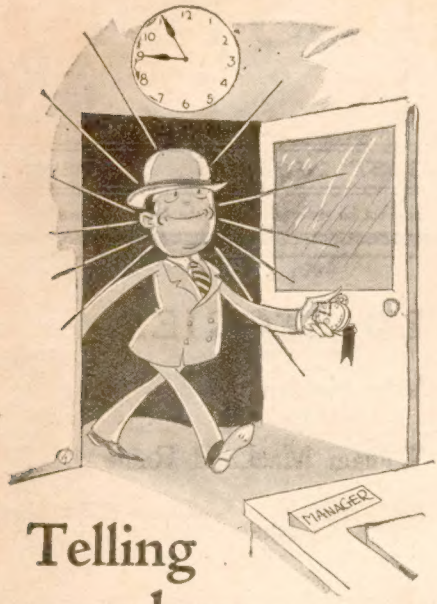

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXIX SATURDAY, AUGUST 14, 1926 NUMBER 5

Thunder off Stage

By JOHN HOLDEN

Author of "Prairie Shock," "Six Day Glory," etc.

CHAPTER I.

AMATEUR'S MISFORTUNE.

MARTIN CANE knew he was in for it, even before he rose on that sun-splashed spring morning. In Glenellen one could not participate in a fiasco such as had occurred on the previous evening and hope to escape without being made fun of for weeks and maybe for months.

Glenellen was that kind of a town. Busy enough with vacationists in summer, it was an isolated mountain town in winter, with no amusements save the movies and such pastimes as the inhabitants could devise for themselves, and folks therefore had the gossiping and joking habit.

They kept a sharp look-out for little errors of omission and commission that would go unnoticed in a city, and played up each little misfortune or mishap until presently a minor tragedy or comedy was erected upon the foundation of perhaps a very small incident.

In Martin Cane's case the incident had

been big enough; an example of good intention gone wrong that would have been conspicuous even in a large community.

No town joker would have to embellish the previous night's mishap; it stood as a side-splitting comedy just as it was. One merely had to recount what had actually happened up there on the stage, in full view of every one in the audience, and if the listener did not double up with mirth at the expense of Martin Cane and his companions, said listener would be disclosing a sad lack of humor—or so thought the Glenellenites.

At the breakfast table in the comfortable Cane home, Martin's mother did not, however, indulge in laughter. She had been present at the play presented by the Glenellen Amateur Dramatic Society on the previous night, and had laughed as heartily as every one else at the error in stage management that had stopped the show, but she realized that Martin would have to endure a long period of scoffing, and she refrained from firing the opening gun.

"Don't let any one make you feel badly, Martin," she admonished. "The mishap was no fault of yours."

Her son grinned good-naturedly as he munched toast and marmalade and poured himself another cup of golden-brown coffee from the glistening silver percolator.

He was an energetic looking young man of some twenty-two years, neither particularly handsome nor noticeably unhandsome. He wore New York clothes with easy abandon and he could appreciate a joke even when he himself was the victim.

"It was my fault in a way," he admitted. "I shouldn't have appointed such a dumb-bell as Johnny Fike to handle the rain and thunder. But what does it matter? Let the people have their fun."

Mrs. Cane's tone took on a perceptible shade of concern.

"You don't suppose Mr. Bowen will hold it against you, do you? Be angry about people laughing at his teller, I mean? Maybe he'll think you're not smart enough to work in his bank. He's a great man for dignity, Mr. Bowen is."

Martin scouted the idea.

"Goodness, no! The cashier understands that when a bunch of small-town amateurs undertake to put on a play, anything is liable to happen."

"I suppose he does. Ought to, anyway. But I'm afraid that your fine performance of previous plays counted against you. That is, they made people expect so much."

"Yes, but—oh, well, what's it matter? If a regular theatrical company would only take the trouble to come here once in awhile, we wouldn't bother to serve up the spoken drama at all. But one never does. There's nothing but movies. Good movies, of course. But somehow they don't satisfy entirely; people will keep on hankering to hear the spoken drama. It's an inherited habit, I suppose; our ancestors heard spoken drama for hundreds if not thousands of years, while movies are no older than I am."

Martin Cane rose and picked up his soft felt hat.

"Well, I've got to make tracks. Goodby."

He stepped out the door onto the wide veranda, stood there for a moment to bask in the warm sunshine that was prying loose the grip of King Winter, and strode off, whistling, to his job at the State Bank of Glenellen.

As Cane anticipated, he had not proceeded far when a friend halted him and prodded him in the chest with the long forefinger of the habitual kidder.

"Well, well, Cane! Some show last night. Honest to goodness, I thought I'd laugh my head off. The way Johnny Fike made thunder off stage—gosh, but it was funny!"

"A perfect scream," Cane agreed good-naturedly.

"Everything was going so nice up there on your stage, too. The wind was whistling like all git-out—"

"Oh, yes; we got quite a whistle into the wind, if I do say it myself."

"The rain was a swishing and a sloshing just like a downpour on a dark and stormy night. In fact, I overheard an old lady say she'd sure get wet going home on account of having forgot her umbrella. Sort of forgot, you see, that your rain was just stage rain—"

"Oh, I don't doubt it. We were careful to lay in a stock of the best swishing rain obtainable."

The fellow continued with unabated enthusiasm:

"You, as the hero, were loving up the girl first rate, too—not a hard job, I suppose, considering that's she's just about the best-looking and most popular—"

Martin evaded the forefinger which was still prodding at his chest like the beak of a woodpecker. "So glad you liked our play, old chap—all but the thunder, though it seems you got plenty of fun out of that, too. But excuse me, will you? Got a date at the bank."

Shaking off his friend and proceeding along the wooden sidewalk, Cane muttered to himself: "One of the village comedians disposed of—but there'll be others, I suppose."

He sighted one ahead and considered turning down a side street to avoid him, but concluded that he might as well face the music now as later. It might be said that Martin Cane was not the sort of chap who turns down side streets to avoid anything.

"Well, well, Martin!" exclaimed the second pest. "Some thunder last night. The way it rolled and rumbled during that there stage storm of yours sure had me sitting on the edge of my seat and hanging on to the arm rests. If that darned fool, Johnny Fike, hadn't gone and dropped his thunder-making sheet of tin right smack down on the stage, where every one could see it when it wasn't meant to be seen—"

"Hah, hah, hah!" said Cane with dismal mirth. "Funny—yes. That's what they all tell me. But I'm glad you liked it, old kid."

The fellow gave him a suspicious look. "Say, looky here—you didn't go and do that a purpose, did you? Just to give people an extra laugh they weren't looking for?"

Cane throttled his make-believe laughter. "Not a chance. That business of the thunder falling on the stage was rotten stage management, and don't let any one tell you differently. If Johnny Fike claims he did it on purpose I'll bounce the bonehead around as if he were a basketball. At that, I don't know as Johnny is as much to blame as I, for giving him the job. So go ahead and laugh. Enjoy yourself. We may never make another blunder, then you'll never have another chance."

The fellow looked alarmed.

"Gosh, Martin, you ain't going to quit putting on your amateur plays, are you? Don't go and do anything like that, just because folks laugh at you a little bit. The town would miss them like everything. Nobody else around here ever was able to give an entertainment that could hold a candle to yours."

"No, that isn't what I meant. Laughing at our mistakes doesn't worry us much. We're just a bunch of amateurs, you know—not to be compared with even third-class professionals. Just so long as the audience does laugh at something, it's all right."

The fellow started to giggle again.

"Well, the audience sure did laugh, Martin. Not only in the movie theater, where you staged your play, but on the street afterward. People are still laughing and will be for a month if I don't miss my guess. Gosh, think of it! Big sheet of tin blamming down on the stage in full view of every one, making a clang that would waken the dead, and you just getting all set for that spoony scene with the girl—"

Cane seemed strangely averse to discussing the spoony scene with the girl. He cut in again:

"Well, I got to be ankling along to the bank now. See you again after you've laughed some more."

Behind his teller's wicket at the bank, Cane tried to look solemn and businesslike. But it was no use. Customers grinned the minute they caught sight of him and either joked or commiserated. The town's prim and scholarly school-teacher was more inclined toward the latter.

"It was unfortunate that you were unable to pull the cast together after the distressing accident," she stated in her precise and dignified manner. "Your heroine, for instance—really, it seemed to me that Miss Mitson need not have forgotten her lines just because a slight mishap occurred."

"Guess we all went up in the air," Cane admitted dolefully. "That's what we get for being amateurs. Professionals, even cheap carnival ones, would have rippled right along without omitting so much as the flicker of an eyelash."

The schoolma'am smiled in a would-be alluring manner.

"Not all of you went up in the air, as you put it, Mr. Cane. Indeed not. Your own performance was more than excellent."

Cane bowed. "Thank you."

"If your leading lady were only half so competent—"

Cane interrupted. "You don't think that my leading lady amounts to much as an actress, now, do you?"

His tone became faintly sarcastic. "It is barely possible, perhaps, that you might be able to suggest a better one?"

The school-teacher missed the sarcasm by a mile.

"Well, of course—if you really desire another girl to assume the leading rôle in your plays—" The lady paused significantly and blushed as girlishly as her middle age would permit. She could recite from the classics with all the verve and vivacity of a mechanical doll, and did so whenever permitted.

"I could call upon no better person than yourself," Cane finished for her. "Thank you very much for the suggestion, but really, for the present at least, I think we shall try to worry along with our present company."

Hauteur displaced girlishness. "The matter is, of course, in your hands, Mr. Cane. But I must go now. So sorry you all made a spectacle of yourselves. Good day."

The lady departed with dignity and the three dollars which she had drawn from her personal account, and the amateur Thespian breathed a trifle more freely.

Mr. Bowen, the cashier, had made no comment upon the play as yet, but Cane knew that he would. He was anxious to learn whether or not his boss was vexed with him. It was possible that Mr. Bowen was angry, despite Cane's assurance to his mother that the cashier would appreciate the humorous mishap as much as any one. Along toward noon the cashier spoke, and Cane listened attentively.

"I wonder, Martin, if, after all, it is a good thing for one of the bank's staff to mingle in activities which invite the mirth of the community. Dignity, you know—it is an excellent asset for a banker."

Cane had his reply all ready.

"For a bank official—undoubtedly, sir. But for a clerk like me? Well, I'm not so sure. It seems that our depositors like to laugh, even when they come in here to do business."

Mr. Bowen considered. He was not an unreasonable man; quite a good employer, as employers go. But he was dignified, and he had a vast respect for his calling.

"Maybe you are right. Yes, I dare say you are. That is, so long as one does not make oneself a perpetual laughing stock in the community."

"I shan't do that, Mr. Bowen."

It was nearly noon when Elaine Mitson came in, and when she did Martin Cane caught his breath and his hand trembled just a little.

He loved Elaine. Her coming seemed to brighten up his businesslike environment like sunshine bursting into a dark room. On the stage he was her make-believe lover; off stage he was her real lover, and he was as ardent a one as ever quivered to the approach of his inamorata.

Elaine was a slender girl and pretty, though not flamboyantly so. Her eyes, in particular, were beautiful and soulful beyond the power of Martin Cane to express.

But just now they were abashed and troubled. She handed him a small check to be cashed, but it would seem that her real purpose in coming was to discuss with her lover the previous night's mishap.

"Oh, Martin," she began, a bit breathlessly, "is everyone still laughing at us?"

Cane was touched by her obvious distress. For a moment he almost hated amateur theatricals because they had made Elaine miserable; then he recollected that it was their mutual love of the drama that had brought them together in the first place. He hoped to marry Elaine some day, when

he had managed to scrape together a little more money out of his small salary.

"Such an idea, Elaine!" he reproved, gently. "Of course they're not—not really. Just giving us a little good-natured joshing which, come right down to it, we deserve. But we should worry. I've read reviews of professional performances in which the actors were roasted lots worse than we're getting roasted to-day. That's one of the penalties that one pays for trying to entertain people."

Elaine still was doubtful. "Maybe—but no professionals ever dropped their thunder on the stage when it should have been dropped off stage."

Cane grinned. Just to look at Elaine somehow made him feel happier, especially when he could feel that he was making her happier, as he thought he was now. Also he could appreciate the mirth-provoking quality of the previous night's error, now that his first shock of exasperation at Johnny Fike's stupidity and clumsiness had worn off.

"Give the spectators a perfectly executed play and they'd be disappointed," he argued. "Folks always expect a mishap at an amateur performance."

"I suppose you're right." Elaine made a pretense of counting her money.

It was not much. The Mitson family was poor. The widowed mother possessed only a small income, and the other child, Ned, was a good-for-nothing loafer who contributed not a cent to the family exchequer. Elaine did not work, but she probably would have had there been a suitable opening.

"Have you heard," she asked, when she finished her counting, "about the professional troupe that's coming to town next week?"

Cane was surprised. No other customer was in the bank at the moment, so he could talk to his sweetheart without feeling that he was wasting his time.

"You don't mean it!" he cried. "A real theatrical company?"

"Hardly that. Just a group of three, I think, from some carnival outfit. They want to do a one-act play every night for a week at the movie house. To follow the picture, you know. A different one each night, I think, though I'm not sure. There's a man in town talking to Manager Rawson right now."

Cane was enthusiastic. "Say, I hope they come. Do us good to see professionals, even if they're only carnival performers—the lowest class, I understand. Rawson ought to be able to hire them and make a profit, too, because people would pay double prices to see a picture that would be followed by a one-act play given by professionals."

"That's what I think." Elaine was regaining her customary enthusiasm, which had been clouded by the previous night's mishap.

She left presently, and Cane considered the possible effect of a visit from professionals. He sincerely hoped they would come. Watching a real actor perform was a wonderful treat for him.

He could appreciate so much that the ordinary spectator overlooked—little nuances of voice, tricks of gesture, the thousand and one small accomplishments that are second nature to every professional and so tremendously difficult for an amateur to acquire. He must find out as soon as he left the bank that afternoon whether or not the troupe had been engaged. He might even go so far as to try to persuade Manager Rawson to secure them.

At noon the cashier and the other two employees went home for lunch, and Cane was left alone. In an ordinary bank a single person would not have been left on guard, but the State Bank of Glenellen was not an ordinary one. It was small, and situated in a crime-free town. It never had been robbed, and no one seemed to consider the possibility that some day it might be. The old-fashioned safe was kept locked during the noon hour, but Cane possessed the combination and could open it if it were necessary.

It was twenty minutes of one when a stranger entered the bank and, with a quick look around that seemed to take in every detail of the bank's interior, spied Cane and walked toward him. Cane recollected afterward that he had glanced at the clock while the man was striding from the door

to his teller's window, and the precise time had stuck in his mind.

The stranger wore spats, an air of dignity, and a fur-lined overcoat, and he carried a stick. Undoubtedly he was an actor. The profession was written all over him, from the crown of his small derby hat to the soles of his well-worn though highly polished shoes.

He was a comparatively young man, and Cane thought it odd at first that any actor except an old one should be garbed in the traditional manner of the profession. While visiting in New York during the previous summer he had seen groups of unemployed actors hanging around the street corners on Broadway above Times Square, and it seemed to him then that the younger ones did not cling to the old earmarks of the profession.

The stranger stopped in front of Cane.

"You are Mr. Cane?" he inquired, with dignity.

Glenellen's leading amateur actor admitted that such was his name.

"I am Oscar Twiss—a member of the profession in which I understand you are interested as an amateur."

Cane could not put his hand through the close-together bars of his wicket, but he could bow cordially, and he did so.

"I'm glad to meet a real actor, Mr. Twiss. I suppose you're the gentleman that's been talking to Rawson, the movie man. How did you make out with him? Is he going to engage your troupe to supplement his pictures with one-act plays next week?"

Twiss seemed flattered by Cane's interest.

"I am happy to say, Mr. Cane, that we have been engaged. Though I fear that we hardly qualify as a troupe. A group of three—that is all—a lady and a gentleman and my humble self."

"Quite enough, I should say, to act any number of first-class one-act plays. I once saw in New York a whole three-act play that was most excellently played by only two people, a man and a woman."

"Thank you, Mr. Cane. The local manager thought at first that there were not enough of us, but he changed his mind when I showed him several one-act plays that call for a cast of only two men and a woman—triangle stuff, of course, but, after all, the old situation of two men battling for one woman is the best basis for any one-act play."

"Well, I'm glad you're coming," Cane said. "We amateurs will go to see you every night and take our friends."

Cane grinned in his good-natured way. "We may be awful actors, Mr. Twiss, but we're right there when it comes to appreciating the real stuff."

Twiss held up a protesting hand. "Amateurs are not necessarily awful, Mr. Cane, nor even poor. Many of the leading members of the profession were amateurs first—stepped right into leading professional rôles and made good at once."

"I dare say. But we're awful here. Ask anybody."

Twiss was compelled to smile slightly.

"I see that you've heard about us already," Cane went on. "Some one has told you how we dropped our thunder on the stage last night. Some blunder all right. We're sure getting bawled out about it today. I don't know if we'll ever dare to attempt another dramatic production."

"My dear sir," protested Twiss, "don't be discouraged by one trifling mishap. Blunders even more noticeable than that have occurred in New York's best theaters."

Cane reflected that the noonday lull in business would end soon, therefore he had better get Twiss's business attended to immediately.

"Like to get a check cashed—something like that?" he inquired diplomatically.

"Yes and no." Twiss glanced at the big safe that stood so conspicuously just outside the teller's cage and a little to the rear. A lighted electric lamp hung in front of it at night and occasionally Constable Joe Dolphin glanced in as he walked past—a mere matter of form, because Glenellen was so free from crime that the horrible stories of murders and robberies committed elsewhere with frightful frequency seemed as unreal as though they happened in another world.

"I do desire to transact a little banking business," said Twiss, "but the main ob-

ject of my visit, Mr. Cane, is to make you a proposition that may at first seem very strange."

CHAPTER II.

AN ODD PROPOSAL.

"THE business that I want to do," Twiss went on, "is to engage a safe deposit box in that big safe of yours. I presume that you have some. Small-town banks usually have."

Cane was a trifle surprised. "There are some boxes," he admitted, "and one or two are not in use. But I shouldn't think that a traveling man like you would want one. You don't expect to make Glenellen your headquarters, do you?"

"No. New York is my headquarters. But it happens that I have recently come into possession of some valuable papers and I don't wish to carry them around any longer. They'll be just as safe here as in New York, and later on, when a favorable opportunity offers, I can transfer them."

"All right," acquiesced Cane. "The charge is five dollars for a year or any lesser period."

Twiss paid the amount from a thin bank roll, and Cane gave him a receipt. Then Cane left his teller's cage, locking it behind him, and walked around to the safe in front, Twiss at his shoulder.

Cane did not hesitate to twirl the knob on the safe door because he happened at the moment to be alone in the bank. It was not the custom in Glenellen to take all the elaborate precautions against robbery that obtain in larger and less law-abiding places. Anyway, most of the cash was back in his cage, which he had locked.

With Twiss standing at his shoulder and rattling off diverting comments about theatrical life, Cane twirled the knob right and left, working out the safe's simple combination in the old familiar way. There was no time lock; the safe was too old-fashioned to possess such a modern contrivance.

He swung open the heavy door, and, stepping inside, drew an oblong metal box from its niche and handed it to the man who had paid for the use of it.

"Very good," said Twiss. "It's just the right size." He reached into an inside coat pocket, drew forth some documents, placed them in the box, and handed it back. Cane replaced the box in its niche, relocked the safe, and returned to his post inside the teller's cage.

Twiss was scribbling something in a notebook, which he now closed and replaced in his pocket.

"Memoranda regarding the papers," he explained, then, with a glance at the bundles of currency in the cage. "What an amount of cash you keep on hand!"

"Quite a bit," Cane admitted. "Glenellen is rich enough, despite its small size, and this is the only bank, whereas most towns of this size have two and sometimes three." He feared they would not be left alone much longer, so he reminded:

"You spoke of a proposition, Mr. Twiss."

The actor rubbed his hands with a gesture either of satisfaction or anticipation.

"Yes, of course. An idea that came to me when I heard of your misfortune last night; a plan that ought to work out to the satisfaction of both of us."

Cane was interested.

"Glad to hear it," he said, leaning forward so that his face was right up against the little bars of his cage.

Twiss cleared his throat and spoke with impressive seriousness.

"It struck me, Mr. Cane, that your reputation as an actor may have been slightly impaired by your misfortune last night, and that you might not be averse to repairing the damage."

Cane laughed.

"Impaired is no name for it. All the acting reputation I've got left, you could put in a thimble. But how can I repair it?"

Twiss looked around to make sure that no one had entered to overhear them, and dropped his voice to a lower and more important pitch.

"Change places with me when we stage our first one-act play next Monday night," he suggested. "Folks will think there's a regular professional actor on the stage. Chances are, they'll make comparison and

say how much better he is than you, Then, when they learn that the actor they admired and praised as being so much better than any one in town is none other than their well known fellow townsman that they laughed at—well, you can see for yourself what the result will be.

"They'll be knocked cold with astonishment. They'll feel like a pack of know-nothings. You'll have the biggest laugh on this town that any man ever had on any town. Why, it 'll simply be colossal, a joke that'll be printed in the newspapers from one end of America to the other. And then the natural reaction. Think of that. Your fellow townsmen will have to admire you, whether they want to or not—but they will want to—and last, but not least, they'll forget all about the blunder you made last night."

Twiss ended his little speech with a flourish and stood smiling, like one who expects to receive well-merited applause.

Cane had listened with rapt attention and now he paused to consider the proposition. His first reaction was amazement combined with a sense of gratitude toward Twiss for having suggested such an admirable plan to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the town; then, as he continued to think about it, he grew a bit puzzled.

"Say! That certainly does sound good, Mr. Twiss, and I thank you for suggesting it. But there's a bit of a question in my mind. Can it be done? Gosh, I don't see how. The audience will recognize me; they'll find out, first crack out of the box, that I'm not you but just myself."

Twiss smiled as though he had anticipated the objection and had a convincing argument all ready.

"No they won't; not in the part I have in mind for you. You see, Mr. Cane—" Twiss leaned forward a little, as though under the force of his sincerity—"it's the rôle of a French-Canadian lumberjack.

"You'll wear great heavy woollen clothing that will make you look bigger, and a beard that in itself will be almost a complete disguise. On top of that, I'll make you up so even your own mother won't recognize you. You know how—different-colored hair, bushy eyebrows, heavy lines in your face. Even if folks were expecting you to act the rôle I doubt if they'd be able to recognize you. But they won't be expecting you. Don't forget that. That is, if you can keep the secret absolutely to yourself, if you will refrain from dropping even the slightest hint to any one whatsoever as to what you intend to do. In fact, it is only on such a condition that I can permit you to take my part in the play. Absolute secrecy!"

Cane turned the idea over and over in his mind, as a squirrel turns a nut in its paws.

"Yes, I dare say I might be able to make up so my appearance wouldn't give me away. But my voice, Mr. Twiss—people will catch on to that. A voice can't be so easily disguised as features."

Twiss held up an objecting hand.

"Pardon me, but I beg to differ. In the lumberjack rôle your voice can be disguised just as heavily as your features. The extreme French-Canadian accent—you see? Of course, you do. Why, with an accent like that, the voice just naturally becomes disguised whether one wants it to be so or not."

Cane was beginning to see the proposition.

"Gosh, you may be right! And say—it would be a joke, wouldn't it? My stars, yes!" Cane laughed in anticipation. "People will be sure to compare the town amateurs with you professionals first crack out of the box. They'll kid every amateur in sight. 'Don't you fellows wish you could act like those chaps?' That sort of stuff. Eh? And then, when they find out that one of the actors they're admiring so much is the good old home product—oh, boy! Some joke is right!"

Cane's countenance clouded again.

"But, gosh! We're forgetting something again. I really would have to act as well as the other two professionals. The joke would have no point at all if I showed up as the weak sister of the combination. And how can I do that? I'm no professional. I'm nothing, Mr. Twiss, but an ignorant amateur."

Twiss smiled as though he had anticipated that argument, too.

"I can set your mind at ease on that score, Mr. Cane. Right this minute I don't suppose you can act so well as us professionals. But with a little painstaking coaching—eh? I'm some coach. I know the game. Believe me, I do. I can put you into the professional class.

"And here's another thing: The lumberjack part is the least difficult of the three parts in that particular play. Still another thing: There is only the one act—a much simpler proposition than if it were a regular three or four-act play."

Cane was being persuaded.

"The other two players could help me out, I suppose, eh? If I should get into a difficulty, I mean."

"Absolutely."

The idea sounded pretty good to Cane now, but still there were little points that he was doubtful about.

"What I don't just understand, Mr. Twiss, is just what your personal reason is for telling me all this. Why should you want to go to so much trouble to help me play a joke on the people of Glenellen? It will mean a lot of work for you, just coaching me. Then there's the chance that I'll disgrace your company. What will you get out of it? It isn't reasonable that you should get no reward at all, and I can't just see what your reward would be."

The actor looked slightly embarrassed.

"Well—er—I was coming to that. You see—well, I'm a professional trouper and I'm out for the coin. Glory means very little to me, Mr. Cane, though, of course, it means practically everything to you. So I thought that maybe you wouldn't mind—to be frank, Mr. Cane, my idea is that you should pay me for the privilege of permitting you to take my place."

Cane felt relieved. A vague suspicion that Twiss might have some questionable motive had come to him, but now it was removed.

The man simply wanted to make an extra bit of money. He was in the acting profession for the coin, as he expressed it, and, so far as Cane could see, there was no reason why he should not make money out of his art in ways other than by actually acting.

"How much?" he asked, a bit fearfully because he wanted to go ahead with the substitution now, and he feared that the fee might be beyond his means.

"The sum I had in mind," replied Twiss, "was one hundred dollars."

Cane was keenly disappointed. He could not afford to pay that much. It would be wonderful, he thought, to reëstablish his reputation as an actor, to play a joke on the town, but, after all, acting was only a hobby for him and it would not be wise to squander too much money on any hobby.

He needed every cent of his limited funds. It was only his lack of money that prevented his immediate marriage to Elaine Mitson. Slowly and regretfully he shook his head. Now that the proposed joke was beyond his reach it seemed to be the best he ever had heard of, an entirely practical one that he could surely carry through to a brilliant conclusion.

"No," he said sadly, "I guess I'll have to pass up your offer, Mr. Twiss, enticing as it sounds. A hundred dollars is simply more money than I can afford to pay. I'm trying to save money, not spend it. I hope to get married some day, and I'm afraid the applause of the town wouldn't help me much in furnishing a home."

Twiss looked downcast.

"Well, I don't know as I blame you. I suppose a hundred dollars is a lot of money in a little town like this. But it seems such a shame, though. To let such a grand opportunity pass, I mean."

He frowned as though in deep thought and pounded his clenched fist gently on the little desklike protruberance in front of the wicket. "But say! I've got another idea. Not so good as the first, but it might work." More frowning thought. "Yes, sir, it would work! This idea is as good as the first one, and you're just the man to put it through."

Cane was all aquiver again.

"Yes?" he asked eagerly. "What's the idea?"

Twiss looked around again to make sure no one had entered, and lowered his tone as he had before.

"One that will permit you to have your laugh on the town, just the same as my first

proposition would, only this one won't cost you a cent. No, sir! Not one dollar. All fun, and not one penny to pay!"

"What is it?"

"This: Fool not only your friends, but my friends as well—the actor and actress that will present the plays here with me. Get me? Then I'll have the laugh on my pals, the same as you'll have the laugh on yours."

Cane was disappointed.

"Oh, no, Mr. Twiss. That idea is no good."

"Why not?"

"It won't work. It's not practicable. I wouldn't be able to fool your fellow artists. The townspeople, yes—but the two professionals who would play with me? Never!"

Twiss looked disappointed for a moment, too, but then he brightened and burst into speech with his former volubility.

"Now, look here, Mr. Cane. Who is in a better position to know whether it will work or not, you or me? I am, and you know it. I think it will work. That is, if you'll do precisely what I tell you."

Cane shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, I'd do that right enough. But still, I cannot, for the life of me, see how it can be done. Man alive, do you realize what you're saying? Me, an untrained amateur, step up there on the stage and go through the play with those two professionals without them catching on to the fact that I'm not the man they've been accustomed to playing with? Why, I don't see how Barrymore himself could get away with that."

Nevertheless, Twiss seemed to have grown more sanguine instead of less.

"He couldn't," he argued, "but you can. The idea does seem preposterous at first glance, yes. I'll admit that. But let me explain. There's a lot of things you don't understand. First off, you and me are about the same build and our voices are similar, too. Then, there's the fact that I joined the other two only a short while ago and they don't know me so well as you think they do.

"They're newlyweds, Cane, and off the stage they don't give me so much as a look. All wrapped up in themselves, see? It happens that we've done this particular little drama together only once, so they're not any too familiar with the way I play the lumberjack. The accent is heavy, as I said before, and the disguise is so absolutely obliterative of the actor's identity that I am positive it will deceive even them.

"They won't dream that any one is substituting for me, and I can prepare them beforehand for any little slip you may make by claiming during the day to be ill. I'll say my throat is sore and I'll talk hoarsely, and that will make them expect some slight difference in voice."

Cane still could not regard the proposition as being quite feasible.

"They'll see me on the stage beforehand," he pointed out. "You all make up together, don't you?"

Twiss replied vehemently:

"No, we don't. That's just what gives you your chance. In this town, where the rear of the hotel is so close to the rear of the theater, all three of us would make up in our separate hotel rooms. You can go straight from my hotel room to the stage entrance of the theater, grunt a gruff word or two at Horace or Lily if either addresses you, go through your part, and slip back to the hotel immediately after you've taken your bow."

Still Cane was dubious.

"I don't know. It might be done. The way you explain it, it does sound halfway feasible at least. But I'm afraid the chances are about four to one against my success. That is, to fool your companions, Horace and Lily, as you call them. So far as the audience is concerned, I dare say I could get by all right in a heavy disguise."

Twiss spread out his hands, palm upward.

"Well, what if you don't fool Horace and Lily? You'll fool the audience—you admit yourself that you can do that—and that's all that you really need to care about. The business of deceiving my pals is my affair, see? I'm willing to take a chance. If you succeed, fine; if you don't, I'm not out anything."

"You'll be out the time and attention you will have bestowed on me."

"Yes, but that 'll be the price I'll pay for the chance to make suckers of Horace and Lil—the lovesick nuts."

Cane was reconsidering.

Twiss went on: "Of course, you'll have to do extremely good work to fool Horace and Lil. There's no getting away from that. The kind of work that not one amateur in fifty can do. But, from what I hear, you're a good actor. Nobody blames you personally for that accident last night. They try to make you think they do, but that's just to kid you.

"Take Rawson, for instance. He's a real theater man—worked for a producing company in New York before he put his savings into the movie house here. Rawson knows an actor when he sees one, and he told me on the quiet—don't repeat this to him—that he never saw an amateur anywhere that could beat you."

"Amateur, yes. Most amateurs are so rotten that when one looks even halfway good—which is about what I am—he stands out and looks better than he really is. Still, as you say, it doesn't matter to me if Horace and Lily get wise." Cane thought of something. "If I could only see you act the part somewhere—"

Twiss grabbed the words out of his mouth.

"You can! Lord, what a dumb-bell I am, that I didn't think of that! Of course, you can see me act the part, and pick up just how I do it. Down at Millersville, where we're playing the movie house this week. We do the lumberjack play there Wednesday night. Hop down and watch me, and afterward come to my room and I'll give you some coaching."

"I could do that," Cane admitted.

Twiss was all enthusiasm again.

"Will you? Darn it, I wish you would! I sure would like to play a joke on that mushy pair—show them how goofy they are, never paying a bit of attention to any one but themselves."

Cane was so enthralled by the idea that he failed to notice that the last remarks of Twiss had not been made in the dignified manner of the first ones. His last doubt of the feasibility of the proposition was fading away.

"I guess I could have a try at it," he said.

Twiss seemed to realize that he had lapsed into common phraseology and reverted to his stately manner of speaking.

"Good! Come to Millersville Wednesday night. Just sit in the audience. Don't come near me in public or show any sign that you're particularly interested in the play. Engage a room at the hotel and I'll dodge into it if I get a chance. That 'll be better than for you to call at my room because the love birds might get wise. We'll go over the dialogue and business. But be sure and don't let Horace and Lily see us together, either there or here, because if they do they may suspect something."

"I won't; and I'll be in Millersville."

Twiss frowned again. "You're absolutely positive now that you won't drop the slightest hint of what you're up to? Not even to your mother or sweetheart? I've got to have that promise or our deal is off."

"You've got it. It 'll be fun to fool even my very best friends."

"Another thing," stipulated Twiss. "An important thing, too. I'm to be the one who will announce the trick, when you put it over, to Horace and Lil and to the public. Is that understood?"

Cane hesitated.

"Why, I suppose so—so long as you do announce it. No use me fooling the public if the public never learns about it."

Twiss laughed.

"Oh, they'll learn all right. The trouble is, I don't know at just what time I can afford to let them know. I'll have to consult the manager. He may want me to tell the audience right away after the play. Perhaps hint to them that a substitution may be made some other night and invite the public to try to detect it. On the other hand, he may not like the idea of ringing in an amateur, in which case we'll have to keep our secret dark until after the last performance on Saturday night."

Cane considered.

"I'll promise to let you do the announcing, provided you'll promise that you will do it."

"That's a bargain." They shook hands on it. "I'll see you in Millersville Wednesday night?"

"Yes."

"Good-by then; and don't worry."

Oscar Twiss left the bank and, alone in his cage, Martin Cane pondered. An odd proposition, yes, but actors are odd people. He wondered if he really could fool Horace and Lily. Not much chance, he feared. But it seemed likely that he could deceive the audience, and, so far as he was concerned, that was all that really mattered. Not that he would not do his utmost to deceive Horace and Lily, too. Oscar Twiss seemed to be a good fellow, despite the fact that there was something just a little bit queer in his manner and appearance, and Cane desired to do the square thing by him.

A depositor entered the bank, Cashier Bowen returned and so did the bookkeeper, and the afternoon business proceeded as usual.

On Wednesday night Cane went to Millersville. He purchased a movie ticket at an advanced rate, sat through the picture, then prepared to take notes of the one-act play.

It proved to be a thriller of the North Woods with plenty of incidental comedy, a tense and well-developed one-act melodrama, with the action taking place in a log cabin.

The lumberjack part was one that Cane thought he could handle satisfactorily, and he was gratified to find that it afforded quite as good an opportunity for disguise as Twiss had claimed. In fact, Cane could not tell for certain whether or not it was Twiss who played the part. He made copious notes of cues and stage business, and after it was all over Twiss called on him at the hotel, just as he had promised.

"Think you can get away with it?" Twiss asked Cane.

"Yes, I do."

"Good. Here's the part. Sorry I could not get a copy to you sooner, but you've got plenty of time between now and Monday to learn it."

"I'll get the words all right—the business, too, I hope."

"Of course you will. There's nothing difficult about playing the part of a roughneck. Just stamp about and shout. It's when you play more subtle parts that you've got to be good."

"All right. See you in Glenellen."

Twiss was a bit perturbed. "Say, no one will suspect anything because you left there this evening, will they?"

"No; I gave a good excuse."

"You're sure you won't drop even the slightest hint about playing the part; not even to your best friend among the amateurs?"

"Quite sure."

"That's fine. Remember now—don't pay any attention to me when we arrive in your town Monday morning. And when you come to my hotel room in the evening don't let any one see you enter."

"I shan't."

They shook hands and Cane returned on the midnight train to Glenellen. He studied the lumberjack's part secretly in his room during the succeeding nights, and soon had the words and business at his finger tips.

On Monday morning he strolled down to the railroad station before the bank opened, and, from a little distance, he saw Twiss and Horace and Lily alight and go to the hotel. The latter two appeared to be ordinary members of the profession, the woman young and aggressively good-looking, the man not quite so young. They seemed to be newly-weds, just as Twiss had claimed, without any interest either in the town or the townspeople.

Back at his post in the bank, Cane became more confident of his ability to deceive Horace and Lily as well as his friends and neighbors.

CHAPTER III.

THE CURTAIN RISES.

DURING the day Cane had to endure various joking comments.

"Of course you're going to see the professionals to-night, Martin. Chance to learn a thing or two about real acting."

"I expect to," Cane admitted.

"Bet you those birds won't drop their thunder on the stage in plain sight of everyone."

"Probably not."

"You ought to take notes."

"Probably shall."

"Guess the whole town will turn out—to see how much better than your gang the real actors are."

"Hope it does."

At noon the flow of banter ceased along with business, although on this occasion Cane was not left alone in the bank as he had been when Oscar Twiss engaged a safe-deposit box. The bookkeeper and the stenographer took turns in going to lunch instead of both going at the same time, so that at twenty minutes past twelve the bookkeeper, a husky young man, was in the bank along with Cane.

Cane was not greatly surprised to see Twiss enter. He had half expected that the actor might drop in to whisper a few words of instruction. He put his finger up to his lip to warn Twiss against unguarded speech the instant that the man stepped inside the door, and Twiss understood at once.

"My safe-deposit box, Mr. Cane," he stated in the manner of one who came on bank business only. "I should like to put something in it if I may."

Cane left his cage, as he had on the occasion of the actor's previous visit, and, with Twiss standing again at his elbow, he opened the safe door.

The latter made only a pretense of putting something into his box.

"Just wanted to ask if everything is okay," he whispered.

"Yes," replied Cane in an equally low tone.

"My room is number eighteen."

"Right."

"Don't let Horace and Lil see you enter; walk right on past it if you happen to meet them in the hall."

"Yes."

"Come at eight or a little before. Want to rehearse you as well as make you up."

"All right."

Aloud, so that the bookkeeper could overhear, Twiss said:

"Thank you, Mr. Cane; sorry to have troubled you."

"No trouble."

The actor departed, and Cane returned to his cage.

"Who's that guy?" asked the bookkeeper.

"One of the actors who will appear in the one-act play that follows the picture at the movie house to-night," Cane explained.

"Know what part he plays?"

Cane disliked the deviations from truth that his undertaking necessitated, but he could not see how they could be avoided.

"Can't say that I do."

The bookkeeper was in a gossiping mood. "Queer thing for an actor to do—engage a safe-deposit box in a little town like this. But then I suppose all actors are queer; wouldn't be what they are if they weren't."

"Guess you're right."

"I hope you're not thinking of becoming a real actor, Martin. It's a rotten life—so uncertain."

Cane grinned. "You don't think I could make good, do you? After what happened the other night?"

"Sure you could. You're a darned good actor, and everybody knows it. Folks just pretend they think you're rotten in order to kid you. Amateur actors always have to stand for being kidded. Chances are, you could beat some of those regular actors if you put your mind to it—especially cheap carnival actors like this gang that's in town now."

Cane did not wish to encourage that sort of reasoning since it might lead to the discovery of his identity that night.

"Bunk," said he. "Let's forget it."

The bank doors closed as usual at three o'clock. Cane balanced his cash and transferred the bank notes and coin from his teller's cage to the safe. There was more than the usual amount of cash on hand, owing to the fact that spring business was picking up—a little more than thirty thousand dollars.

He laid the bundles of bank notes and bags of coin on the ledge inside the safe, swung the big door shut, and locked it.

Then he turned on the heavily shaded electric lamp that hung in front of the safe, though the light would be of no use until darkness came. During the night it would light up the safe door, so that Constable Joe Dolphin could look in through the front window as he made his rounds and see that everything was all right.

At three thirty Cane was through for the day, somewhat earlier than usual, although he was an efficient teller and rarely failed to get his books and cash balanced by three forty-five.

Mr. Bowen and the other two employees had got away even earlier, so that, when Cane locked the front door, no one was left inside.

The first person whom he met on the street was Elaine Mitson.

"Going to the play?" she asked.

"Yes, I hope so. Afraid I'll not be able to get there in time for the picture, though."

Cane felt a bit embarrassed because ordinarily he would have asked Elaine if he might have the pleasure of her company.

"Oh, you must get there for the play, no matter how busy you are at the bank. It ought to be an education for us amateurs—seeing professionals act. I'm going to watch every move that every one of them makes—listen with all my ears to every word that's spoken."

Cane wondered if she would be able to detect him in the part of the lumberjack. One thing was certain: if he could deceive her, no one else would penetrate his disguise.

"I expect to be pretty attentive myself to-night, and the other nights too. When the show people have left we'll have a club meeting and discuss what we've learned. Don't you think that would be a good idea?"

"Very good."

Cane was glad to get away from Elaine without, he was sure, having dropped the slightest hint as to what he intended to do that evening. It hurt him to have to deceive her. He never had done so before, and he had been minded at first not to do so on this occasion; but he had promised Twiss that he would drop no hint whatsoever to anybody, and he was not the sort to make light of a promise.

Elaine would forgive him when she learned the truth, and so would his mother. They would realize that a secret imparted to another ceases to be a secret. They would appreciate the joke that he hoped to play on them; would be as quick to congratulate him if he succeeded as any one else.

Farther down the street Cane met Elaine's brother, Ned—a young man whom he always was sorry to meet, just as he always was glad to meet Elaine. Ned Mitson was a constant humiliation to his sister and mother. He was a loafer, a good-for-nothing waster who took no interest in anything worth while. Just now he looked particularly disreputable. Bits of straw that clung to his unkempt clothing showed that he had been sleeping in the livery stable, his long legs were shaky as though he were just recovering from a period of intoxication.

"Hello, Cane," said Ned, with a sort of hang-dog cordiality that Cane disliked.

"Oh, hello, Ned—how's tricks?" Cane always tried to be friendly with Ned, much as he disapproved of him. He had got Ned out of minor scrapes more than once, and feared that he would have to do so again in the future. Not that Ned did not appreciate favors. He was an amiable weakling, not vicious in the least, and he had always shown a high regard for his sister's sweetheart.

"Tricks are not so good," replied Ned. "I want to see that show that comes after the picture to-night, and I'm broke flatter than molasses on a plate."

Cane shook his head in doleful pretense.

"Well, well! But, say, Ned—I know a dandy way to keep from being broke all the day. A little plain manual labor. It's been highly recommended by kings and presidents and all sorts of nabobs."

"Yah—work! That's what sis says, and the old lady too. But heck! I know all about work, and it's not so good—'less'n a fellow gets a nice soft job like yours, nothing to do but stand around and wear a clean collar and handle money all day. You

get me a bank job, Martin, and I'll go to work to-morrow."

"Well, I don't know about the bank, Ned, but I'll try to get you something just as good."

"All right, though I'm telling you that handling coin is the one thing I can do best. Which reminds me—how about giving a fellow a little practice in that line? The loan of a dollar, say—so I can see that regular show by regular actors to-night. Heh, Martin? Pay you back when I get a bank job. Honest to goodness, I will. Cross my heart and hope to die and everything."

Cane dug up. He wanted to get rid of Ned—wanted to get home and off the street where embarrassing questions were likely to be asked.

"All right, Ned." He handed the latter a crisp bill. "But mind you now—no blowing it in for hootch."

"Thanks, Martin."

Ned made off, shuffling down the street more like a tramp than the only son of a highly respected family, and Cane looked dolefully after him.

"Too bad," he thought. "Ned will get himself led into some real trouble one of these days if he keeps on hanging around that livery stable with the town bootleggers."

At home Cane had to be as careful about deceiving his mother as he had been about deceiving Elaine.

"Going to see the show after the picture?" she asked.

"Hope so; part of it anyway."

A truthful statement, Cane reflected, since he would be off the stage more than either of the other two players.

"I suppose you ought to—if you will insist on wasting time with foolish amateur performances that nobody seems to appreciate, because look how they make fun of you when some little mistake happens, as did at your last performance.

Crane ignored the latter part of his mother's comment.

"Have to have some amusement in a small town, mother. And if there's anything more inspiring and interesting than amateur dramatics, I'd like to know what it is. I guess you don't realize what enormous strides the little theater movement has made all over America. Why, even in New York City, that has more commercial theaters than any other city on earth, there are several amateur dramatic clubs. Famous playwrights like Tarkington and O'Neil frequently write plays just for the amateurs."

"Oh, very well. So long as you don't want to become a regular actor, I suppose it's all right."

"No chance. The bank may be less exciting, but it's a whole lot safer. Acting would be nothing but hard work if I relied upon it for a living, whereas now it's nothing but fun."

In his room, Cane ran through his lines again, and after supper he started down town. He was glad that darkness still came at a comparatively early hour, so that he was able to make his way to the hotel, along the back streets, without being recognized and stopped by every person he met.

He entered the Glenellen Hotel by the back door and stepped to room eighteen without meeting any one. He rapped and immediately was admitted.

"Okay? No one suspects?" queried Twiss in a low tone.

"Not a soul."

"Same here. Horace and Lil haven't an inkling. I've been complaining about being sick with a cold all day, so they won't be surprised if the lumberjack's voice sounds a bit strange and his performance is a bit off color."

"That's good. It's likely to be off color all right—from the professional standpoint."

"Now about the lines and business. We had better run through them. But keep your voice low."

They did so, the professional reading the lines of both Horace and Lily, which he knew quite as well as his own. He corrected Cane several times, drilled him in bits of business, imparted instructions in the art of acting which would have cost real money at a dramatic school.

"Don't move the chair like that," he said once. "You speak the line, and then

you move it. Too much jerk about that. Move the chair as you speak. Make the action and the words flow into each other. That gives you smoothness, an apparent lack of effort. The trouble with most amateurs is that they always seem to be working. Try it again."

Cane listened eagerly and was quick to learn. On this account alone, he thought, his venture was worth while. That knowledge would stand him in good stead.

The rehearsal finished to the actor's satisfaction, he next proceeded to dress and make up his protégé. Cane found that the lumberjack's bulky clothing fitted him quite well, though he anticipated a bit of discomfort on the stage because it was so thick and heavy.

He thought of carrying his watch and money and keys in the pockets of his new garb, but Twiss advised against it.

"No; carry nothing in the pockets but the articles you are going to use in the play—the big jackknife, the red handkerchief, the cigars. Then when you put your your hand in your pocket to get the required article there'll be no chance of pulling out something like a bunch of keys that you don't want. Remember that. Never carry anything in the pockets of your stage clothes that you're not going to use in the play. Leave your things here on the dresser till you return."

Cane did as advised.

He completed his preparations, but still he did not leave the room. The motion picture was being shown on the screen at the theater now, and he must wait almost until the moment it was scheduled to finish. He jumped noiselessly when a knock sounded at the door, but Twiss was perfectly at his ease when he questioned gruffly: "Hello?"

"All ready?"

Cane divined that it was the voice of the actor Horace.

"Yes," Twiss answered hoarsely. "Be right along at your heels. Don't wait for me."

The footsteps of Horace and of another person who must have been Lily died away down the corridor, and Twiss rubbed his hands gleefully.

"See? They don't suspect a thing. Just stick around the dark corners off stage while you're awaiting your cue, and answer in the same gruff tone that I used when they speak to you, and there isn't one chance in ten they'll get wise. But if they should happen to, explain quickly and warn them to keep it dark.

"They will; you needn't worry about that. They won't want the manager to catch on, or the audience, any more than you do. And as for the audience getting wise on their own account—don't give that a thought."

Cane was not so sure, now that his big moment was advancing rapidly, that he need not worry. He felt clumsy and awkward.

He kept repeating his opening lines because he was terrified lest he should forget them. He had never suffered from stage fright at the amateur performances, but he did now.

Previously the audience had half expected errors, but now they expected a finished performance. They would think a professional was playing the part and would be quick to resent any sign of incompetence. They might well suspect his trick if he made a conspicuous slip, might even penetrate his disguise, and stop the show in anger rather than in fun.

If they did—but Cane dared not think of that. The scoffing he had received before would be as nothing compared to the derisive treatment he would receive from the townspeople should he fail in his efforts to deceive them. And that would not be all. He would get into hot water with Twiss, and with Horace and Lily, and with the theater manager. The little troupe might be dismissed, and, blaming their misfortunes on him, might demand that he make good their financial loss.

He must not fail.

Twiss kept looking at his watch.

"Now!" he said, snapping the cover shut and replacing it in his pocket.

Cane was very nervous.

"You'll be here when I come back?" he questioned tremulously.

"Positively. I'll not move out of the room. Some one would see me if I did, and then our trick would be exposed."

"For heaven's sake, don't. I wouldn't think of tackling this job if you weren't back of me."

Twiss opened the door.

"Remember now. You're not Martin Cane any more; you are Oscar Twiss."

"Y-yes."

Cane peered up and down the corridor in the manner of a man contemplating a murder, then stepped quickly out of the room, closing the door gently behind him.

Going down the corridor, he passed no one. He trotted down the rear steps, crossed a wide yard to the rear end of the motion picture theater, and stepped through the stage door into the wings of the little stage that lay so close behind the screen.

The handclapping of the packed house out front crashed on his ears. The motion picture must be nearing its conclusion. Probably the hero was now galloping up to rescue the heroine. In a moment or two the lovers would clinch and fade out, and the spectators would settle back in their seats to enjoy the unusual treat of a regular play by regular actors, even though it was only a one-act play that would run a little less than half an hour.

Cane glimpsed Horace and Lily waiting in the wings.

"Still sick?" Horace barked at him. "You've been poking around like an old woman all day."

Cane croaked three words: "All right now."

The lights in the auditorium were turned up. Cane was able to catch a glimpse of part of the audience, and he saw Elaine Mitson and Mrs. Mitson, also his mother.

The huge audience, packed into the small theater like passengers in a New York subway train, was eager for the play to commence. Already impatient youngsters were beginning to vent their impatience by handclapping.

Neither Horace nor Lily paid any further attention to the man whom they thought was their fellow-actor, Oscar Twiss. Horace walked onto the stage, which was set and waiting, and sat down alone at the log cabin table.

The motion picture screen, which also was the drop curtain, slowly ascended, and Horace spoke the opening words.

The play was under way.

CHAPTER IV.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

THE woman, Lily, was due to make her entrance next, and for a few moments she and Horace would carry on the action of the play.

Cane grew increasingly nervous as he awaited his cue. Glimpsing the spectators again, he saw that they were following the scene with rapt attention. He thought that maybe they had learned of his intention, and were prepared to give him some sort of terrifying reception. He did not feel disguised, though he knew that he was, and very thoroughly, too. In an undertone he kept muttering his opening lines.

His cue!

He strode out upon the stage.

There was no applause, and Cane thanked heaven for that. Always as an amateur his entrance had been applauded, and the fact that now it was not implied that he was not recognized. In fact, in a moment or two his dismissed much of his fear that he would be.

His fear of discovery by Horace and Lily remained, however, and grew greater instead of less. He realized that he was making minor mistakes. In one or two instances he had to supply words of his own because the proper ones escaped him. It seemed impossible that they should fail to penetrate his disguise.

They seemed not to do so, however, and presently he was able to conquer this fear just as he had conquered his dread of the audience. Then his confidence rose. He sensed that he was doing well, and the feeling was immensely satisfying. He was doing even better than Horace and Lily, if the applause was any criterion. Perhaps the audience liked his part better. Yes, that must surely be the case.

Horace and Lily certainly were good. What a satisfaction it was to play with professionals, people who were sure of their lines and business.

Cane realized now how greatly the fear of a blunder on the part of his fellow players had handicapped him as an amateur. He had been compelled to watch out for them as well as for himself; always he had kept their lines in mind, as well as his own, because he could never tell when one of them would have to be prompted. Now that he was free to concentrate on l 's own part, Cane threw himself into his rôle with a gusto that he had never approached before. What fun it was! Really, to get under the skin of the character he portrayed, to put himself in the lumberjack's place, to feel the rôle as well as speak and act it.

Cane was disturbed again, however, as he approached the scene where he must embrace the girl. That, he realized, would be difficult—to do it without revealing his true identity. He would gladly have shirked the kiss if he could.

But there was no way out. The punch of the play depended upon that situation. So he approached her in the approved manner of a stage roughneck, vowing that he would kiss those ruby lips if he died for it. He grabbed her—

Crash!

With a horrified gasp Cane released Lily and stared about him. What had happened? Had the audience learned his identity? Was somebody playing a game on him?

No. The crash had not sounded on the stage, but out front. People were rising and craning their necks to look at one particular spot. The lights were turned up.

Horrible moment of suspense! The increased illumination might reveal his disguise.

No one was paying any attention to him, however, and in a moment he saw what the trouble was. Mrs. Rudolph Gant, who possessed the distinction of being the largest lady in town, had burst through her flimsy aisle seat and now sat on the floor, red-faced, pawing the air, gurgling for help.

Laughter sounded. The unfortunate lady was derricked up to her feet and steered toward the rear, and the spectators, gradually and amidst a babble of comments, resumed their seats.

Cane was a bit surprised to catch sight of Constable Joe Dolphin in the audience. Joe was supposed to be outside, patrolling the town, taking his occasional peek in through the bank's window to make sure no one was trying to break open the safe. Not that it mattered much. Aside from the usual small-town amount of bootlegging, with its concomitant evil of an occasional fight, nothing of a lawless nature ever occurred in Glenellen.

As heretofore, the chances were that no resident had ever gone so far as even to contemplate a murder or a big robbery. Cane thought that if he were in the constable's place he probably would be attending the show, too, and in another moment he dismissed the matter from his mind.

The lights were lowered out front and Lily whispered:

"Go on, Twiss."

Resuming his action where he had left off, Cane grabbed Lily and kissed her. He was glad now that the disturbance had occurred since it would serve as an excuse for his agitation.

"Pep it up," snapped Lily, and another shock of fear smote him, only to vanish in a moment when he felt assured that he had come safely through the kissing incident.

Cane thought that now the worst of his ordeal was over. But presently, when Horace had occasion to slap his face and they squared off for the fight, Cane's heart bounced up in his breast once more when he thought he could feel his false whiskers slipping.

The business of physical contact was over in a moment, however, with his whiskers intact, and Cane breathed freely again. The remainder of the play should be easy.

So it proved to be. The curtain descended to enthusiastic applause, and when it rose again the trio bowed their acknowledgement.

What a sensation would be created, thought Cane, if he should pull off his wig and disclose his identity. What gasps of astonishment, followed by shouts of approval.

But no. He must not think of anything like that. His job was to deceive Horace and Lily and the manager, as well as the spectators, and in order to do so he must continue to represent himself as Oscar Twiss until he had regained the shelter of the latter's bedroom.

He had succeeded so far; at least he was reasonably sure that he had. He must not take any chances of spoiling his success at the last moment; must get away as quickly as possible.

So, when the curtain descended for the second time, Cane walked out the stage door and started back to the hotel.

The darkness was more intense than when he had come, but he was progressing all right when a voice at his elbow sounded:

"Watch out!"

Cane could see nothing but a dim shape. He did not recognize the voice; did not know whether it was a man or woman who had spoken.

"Sorry," he replied and walked on.

Immediately he regretted his one word. Caught off his guard for the first time, he had spoken in his natural tone. Stupid! After all the pains he had taken, too.

The person, whoever it was, seemed not to pay any attention, and by the time he reached the rear steps of the hotel Cane had recovered his equanimity. He mounted them to the corridor of the second floor, walked to room eighteen, knocked, and was admitted.

Twiss had his coat off, just as when Cane had left. A hollow spot in the bed showed that he had been lying on it. Cane's keys and other small belongings lay on the bureau apparently where he had placed them a short time before.

"Been here all the time?" Cane asked.

"Sure; didn't dare go out. How'd you make it?"

"All right, I think."

"Good! But hustle out of your clothes." Twiss assisted Cane to undress.

"I'm sure about the audience, but not quite so sure about Horace and Lily. If they got wise, though, they didn't let on."

"They didn't. You'll see. I'll make sure when they come back." Twiss dipped the end of a towel in the bowl of water, rung out the water, and handed it to Cane. "Rub off the grease paint. Don't lose a second. They're apt to drop in here when they return."

Cane flung his lumberjack's togs on the bed, pulled off his whiskers, rubbed off his make-up with the wet towel, jumped into his own clothes, and replaced his belongings in his pockets.

"Sit down," instructed Twiss, "and let me go over you. Want to make sure there's none of the grease paint left in your ears and nostrils. A mere splotch might give us away. When they call you're a visitor —see—just dropped in after the show to get pointers."

Twiss looked Cane over carefully and pronounced him all right.

"Oh, yes," Twiss recollected with a start. "Tell me everything that occurred. Absolutely everything. Got to answer them if they ask questions. What did they say to you? How did you answer them? Did anything happen out front? Did you trip up anywhere?"

"A fat woman fell through a seat out front," Cane stated. "The lights were turned up for awhile. Lily told me when to go on. Guess I sort of let down, because when we resumed she told me to pep it up."

"Did, eh? That's not so good. What else?"

Cane recounted every other incident that he could recollect. He spoke rapidly, but, even so, he had not quite concluded when a rap sounded on the door, and Twiss opened it to admit his two confreres.

"Oh," said Horace. "Got a visitor, I see."

Twiss introduced Cane as the town's leading amateur who had done them a good turn by persuading all his friends to turn out for the show.

"He came to congratulate us on our fine and dandy performance and ask for a few pointers," he explained.

"Fine and dandy!" exclaimed Horace, scornfully. "All the pointers that Mr. Cane got from you to-night, Twiss, he had better throw overboard. What was the matter with you anyhow? Didn't seem to be yourself at all. One might almost have

imagined that some one else was playing the rôle."

"Should say so," confirmed Lily. "I'm sorry, Mr. Cane, that you didn't see us at our best. Twiss here almost disgraced us. I actually had to prod him into action once—just as though he were some green amateur."

Twiss defended his reputation. "Well, I kept on warning you all day that I didn't feel right. That darned fat woman that fell through her seat startled me, too. I never saw a fat woman fall through her seat before."

Horace backed down a little. "Yes, you did tell us that you weren't feeling right."

"Excuse us for talking shop," he added to Cane.

"Go right ahead," replied the amateur. "That's what I like to hear. Sort of gets one into the atmosphere of the show business."

Lily turned on Twiss again:

"Another thing—what did you run away for? We took two bows after you left. It looked queer when you weren't there to share them with us."

Twiss tried to excuse himself. "Had to, Lil, honest I did. Was afraid I was going to get really sick."

"You look well enough now. Doesn't he, Mr. Cane?"

"I never suspected he was ill at all. His performance looked first rate."

"I am well enough now," explained Twiss. "Now that I don't have to worry about breaking down before everybody."

The girl ignored the remark and turned to Cane again.

"I hope you're not thinking of becoming a professional actor, Mr. Cane." She frowned at Twiss. "You're not putting him up to anything like that, are you?"

There was a shrewish quality in her tone that Cane did not like. He replied:

"Mr. Twiss isn't. But what if he were? Acting looks like an interesting and exciting occupation to me."

Lily sniffed.

"A stray dog's life is exciting, too, but who wants to be a stray dog?"

Cane was subconsciously thinking that he never could like a woman of Lily's type. She was one of the nervous, temperamental, discontented sort. How different from Elaine Mitson! He realized all at once that his sweetheart was even a finer girl than he had always considered her.

"Aw, quit grouching," said Horace roughly to Lil. "Acting is like anything else; full of ups and downs."

Cane decided that he liked Horace even less than Lily. He commented:

"You'll all forget the rough parts when you get to playing to the crowds on Broadway."

"If and when," grumbled the girl pessimistically.

Horace asked Twiss: "Going to be okay for to-morrow night?"

"Positively."

"That's what I wanted to learn." Horace stepped to the door, Lily at his side. "Well, good night, Twiss. Good night, Mr. Cane. Always glad to help you amateurs. Give you a little address or anything like that if you wish."

"Thanks; maybe we'll take you up on that."

"Don't do it; lay off the stage," said Lily to Cane. "You've half got the fever now. Good night."

They went out, closing the door behind them, and for a moment, until he heard the opening of their own door farther down the hall, Twiss was silent. Then he leaped into the air, clicked his heels together, and in a low tone cried:

"You did it! By George, you got away with it! They haven't an inkling that you played the part." Twiss sat down and slapped his knee. "And I didn't think you could. Not really. Didn't think any one could. Fool the hick audience, yes, but not those wise babies. Fellow, you're a better actor than I am. Glenellen's gain is Broadway's loss."

Cane was jubilant, too.

"It seems that I did fool them. But, say, why didn't you tell them? Might as well enjoy your laugh at them now as later on."

Twiss looked alarmed. "Nix! Not yet. Tell them now and they'd say they knew it all the time. They're like that; try to

wriggle out when the joke's on them. But tell them to-morrow, along about noon, after they've admitted a hundred times that they thought I was on the stage with them, and they can't pull any 'I knew it all the time' stuff."

Twiss became severe. "Look here, now, you're not making any mistake about that part of our bargain, are you? I am to tell Horace and Lil whenever I think I should, and until then you are not to murmur a syllable."

"Yes, I remember. I wasn't thinking of saying anything."

"Not to any one, either my friends or yours."

"That's correct."

Twiss became friendly again.

"You see, old chap, we know that we've deceived Horace and Lil, but we don't know as yet that we've put it over on the audience. We're shouting before we have any right to."

Cane laughed.

"Not much chance of the audience getting wise when Horace and Lil didn't."

Twiss agreed.

"So it would seem. But in this crazy profession you can't take anything for granted. Some of the things I've seen would surprise you. What I think we'd better do is to go out and mingle with the folks and make sure they didn't catch on. There must be some place where they go after a show, isn't there? Restaurant, soda fountain or something?"

Cane rose with a new idea.

"That's so. We'll go to Gibson's. My *fiancée* and her mother may have dropped in for a bite to eat and a little gossip. If so, I'm anxious to hear what they've got to say."

"Right. Let's go."

They donned their light overcoats. Again Twiss warned, almost as though the matter had become an obsession with him:

"But no letting the cat out of the bag, remember. Not a word to your *fiancée* or anybody else till I say so. Is that understood?"

"Surely; that was part of the bargain and I always live up to my bargains."

"Come on then."

They left the hotel and joined the after-theater crowd in Gibson's restaurant.

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

CANE caught sight of Elaine and Mrs. Mitson at the rear of the restaurant and started toward them, but was halted by one of the amateur players, a fellow named Barnes, who explained that he just had to meet the man who had played so well the part of the lumberjack. He meant Twiss, and Cane introduced him to the latter.

"I learned a lot about acting from the way you handled that part, Mr. Twiss," Barnes remarked. "When it comes to realism, to putting a character across the footlights, I guess we amateurs can't hold a candle to you professionals."

Twiss shrugged his shoulders and gave Cane a significant look.

"Oh, I don't know. Some amateurs are pretty good."

"What do you think, Cane?" Barnes demanded. "You don't think that one of us could have played the lumberjack part anywhere near so well as he did, do you?"

"I'll say that Mr. Twiss is pretty good," Cane admitted.

"Good is no name for it. He's a peach—the other two also, for that matter. How is it all three of you aren't on Broadway, Mr. Twiss?"

The latter replied modestly:

"May get there some day. Got to work up gradually, you know!"

"Well, I wish you luck. Have you been giving Cane some pointers? Hope so. He needs them." To Cane: "Get all the dope you can, old boy. We'll tackle another show some day when the town has forgotten that awful affair of last week—if it ever does."

"Mr. Twiss has been very generous," Cane admitted. "He has taught me lots of things that I didn't know."

Another man greeted Cane.

"Should think you'd be ashamed to be seen with a real actor." To Twiss: "You wouldn't walk around with that guy if you

knew what a mess he made of the town show last week."

"He was telling me about that," Twiss replied. "I don't think he was so much to blame. Accidents have happened everywhere, even in the Metropolitan Opera House."

"Yeah, but it wasn't any mere accident that happened here. Catastrophe is what I call it."

They reached the table of Elaine and her mother, and Cane introduced his companion.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Twiss," said Elaine. "You're the one who played the lumberjack, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Twiss, unblushingly.

"An excellent performance," commented Mrs. Mitson. "So much better than any of our amateurs could have given. It was such a relief for me just to sit there and feel sure that the play would run smoothly until the end. When our local boys and girls stage a play I'm on edge all the time, fearing that the next instant some mistake will be made."

Elaine asked: "Where were you, Martin? I didn't see you in the audience. Did you see me?"

Evading her first question, Cane answered the last.

"Of course I saw you. You were sitting in the center, next to Mr. and Mrs. Bagby."

"Did you see the picture, too?"

"No, I couldn't get to that. Guess I didn't miss much."

"Oh, it wasn't bad. The usual stuff. Good enough in its way, but hardly to be compared with what followed."

She turned to Twiss: "Really, the town owes you and your two fellow players a debt of gratitude. It's so long since real actors visited Glenellen that most of us had forgotten what they are like. Of course, your visit is bad for us amateurs. Our last performance seems even worse now than it did then. But since we can learn so much from you, I, for one, am very glad you came."

"Thank you," said Twiss, non-committally.

Cane thought of the dollar he had lent to Elaine's brother Ned, and he asked:

"By the way, Elaine, was Ned there?"

She looked a trifle pained, as she always did when her worthless brother was mentioned.

"I didn't see him, did you?"

"No." Cane said nothing about having lent Ned money to go, and the subject was dropped. He felt a bit worried about it, however. He feared that Ned had spent the money for liquor, and that his sister and mother would have to endure more pain and humiliation on that account.

Constable Joe Dolphin dropped in to get a sandwich and a cup of coffee at the counter. He seated himself on one of the revolving stools, but, catching sight of Cane and the others at a table, he sauntered over and addressed Cane.

Dolphin was that sort of constable—friendly with every one, joining in everything that went on, a likable man; a trifle slow and stupid, in the opinion of some residents, but sufficiently competent for such a small and crime-free town as Glenellen had always been.

He joked Cane about the difference between his acting ability and that of the professionals in the same manner as had several others, and in turn Cane bantered him.

"What were you doing at the show, Joe? Thought it was your job to stay on the streets—watch that bank of ours, for one thing."

"Bank of ours—that's a good one. As if you owned any more stock in it than I could buy with cigar coupons. And that's a hot joke about pretending that some one might rob it, too. I guess there's no bank burglar on earth that would be fool enough to risk his liberty for all the jack he could dig out of your old tin can."

Cane laughed.

"Bet you a dollar, Joe, you're afraid to say anything like that to Mr. Bowen."

Dolphin backed down.

"You got me there, young feller. But talking about watching your bank—I only dropped in at the theater to see the play. I hoofed it up and down past your safe while the picture was going on. So you needn't worry about it. It's still there, with your hundred dollars in small change all secure and snug inside."

Gibson, at the counter, called, "Come and get it, Joe," and the constable returned to his repast.

"Seems to be not a bad sort," commented Twiss.

"Joe Dolphin is all right," agreed Cane. "He likes his job and the people like him, so everyone is satisfied."

Presently Elaine and her mother rose to go, and Cane and Twiss offered to see them home.

They strolled slowly toward the edge of town, where the Mitsons lived in a modest bungalow. The men said good night to the women, and sauntered back toward Main Street.

It was a quiet night, as peaceful as could well be imagined. A full moon had come out, and now beamed down upon the little town, showering it with silver brilliance. The soft hoot of an owl sounded in a near-by tree, and from afar off came the wail of some distraught dog, but aside from that the stillness was unbroken.

"Must be a nice town to live in," commented Twiss.

"Yes," admitted Cane, adding: "Some people would call it dead, I suppose."

"Depends on the point of view."

Cane asked presently:

"When are you going to flash the news on the town—about the substitution, I mean."

Twiss paused before replying:

"I don't just know. To-morrow, some time, I suppose. I've got an idea about that—one that came to me as I was walking with Mrs. Mitson."

"Yes?"

"Yes—one that I want to discuss with Horace first, to see whether or not he wants to let the theater manager in on it."

"What is it?" Cane did not fail to note that Twiss seemed none too eager to disclose their secret to the town.

"Well, it struck me that the manager might use the episode to pack his house every night. Oh, I dare say it will be packed anyhow, but he could make doubly sure. Here's what he could do: State that you played the lumberjack part, intimate that on another night some local amateur will again substitute for a regular player, and invite the spectators to try and discover the substitution. Get the idea? Arouse their curiosity. Give them the fun of trying to penetrate the different disguises. Don't you think the townspeople would respond?"

Cane hesitated.

"Why—er—it might work out. Kind of doubt it, though. I wouldn't have got by to-night if the people had been expecting anything."

"Maybe you're right; maybe the idea is no good, and we had better let it alone." Twiss paused. "But you can see why I don't want to tell the public what we did first thing in the morning. I want to discuss it with Horace first, and then, perhaps, if he approves, with the manager. Along about noon I dare say we'll have arrived at a decision, and then I'll spill the news."

"Shouldn't hold it too long," Cane pointed out. "If we do, the audience may be inclined not to believe. Even as it is, my performance may turn out to have been just a little too good. People may find the truth hard to swallow. The logical time to have told them was right at the end of the performance. Had I pulled off my beard then and shouted, 'It is I, your blundering amateur,' even the most credulous of them could not have doubted that it really was I who played the lumberjack."

"That's so," Twiss admitted. "That's what we could have done had you agreed to my first proposition, which was to pay me for letting you take my place. Then there would have been no need to fool Horace and Lily, and make them admit they were fooled. They could have been on the game from the start."

"I couldn't afford to do that."

"Sure; I understand. I don't know as I blame you for not accepting my offer. But you can see how impossible a stage disclosure was when we had to deceive Horace and Lil. We had to keep the deception up till you got out of the rôle, and still have to keep it up, because otherwise they would say they knew all about it all the time, and I wouldn't have any laugh on them at all."

"I know."

The two men were on Main Street now, on the side opposite the bank. Glancing

across the unpaved thoroughfare, Cane could see the electric light in the bank burning as usual. He continued to the hotel with Twiss, and before they parted the latter uttered a last word of caution.

"No telling anyone now till I give the word. You'll be sure about that, will you? It was the bargain, you know."

"Yes, I'll be sure."

They parted, and Cane pointed his footsteps toward home. He turned back the way he and Twiss had come, but on the opposite side of the street now.

The street was practically deserted, nevertheless Cane walked slowly. He did not feel sleepy, even though the hour was late. New thoughts, born of his unusual experience that evening, were popping into his mind, so that in his preoccupation he was not so mindful of his steps as he might otherwise have been.

It certainly had been an exciting evening. And yet the greater part of the excitement, when the town discovered the truth about the lumberjack part, was yet to come. What gaping and gasping there would be!

He wondered if he really could make good as a professional actor. For the first time he felt just a little bit tempted to try. If he really possessed the dramatic instinct and the proper vocal and physical equipment, it seemed a shame to spend his life in Glenellen when a great success on Broadway might be scored.

He wondered where it was that the world's best actors came from. Some of them from small towns. He was sure of that; recollected having read a magazine article which stated that such was the case.

What if the unexpected should happen and the town chose not to believe the announcement about the substitution? How could either he or Twiss, or both of them together, convince the inhabitants that their statement was correct? Cane's mind dwelt on this possibility—a far-fetched one, of course. Who would back up the claim of himself and Twiss? Not Horace and Lily, since they had been fooled as well as the audience. Not the theater manager, since he, too, had not guessed what was going on. Not any one in the audience that he could think of.

A pretty pickle he would be in if folks should laugh at his claim, and tell him to stop his kidding. In that event the laugh would be turned back on him with a vengeance. Aside from the actor's word, he could present no evidence in support of his claim.

Silly imaginings, thought Cane, as he approached his place of employment, on the same side of the street now.

He glanced at the electric light inside as he drew even with the place, and was about to walk on when he fancied that it failed to light up the bank's interior in its usual manner. He stopped in front of the window and looked again.

Queer! There was the lighted electric globe hanging so that the whole town could see it, heavily shaded, as usual, so that a cone of light was thrown down to the floor and everything outside that cone remained in darkness, but where was the safe that it was supposed to shine on?

Why, it was only in order that the safe door should be lighted that the electric lamp was placed there. Evidently it had been shifted to one side or the other, so that its cone of light just missed the safe door.

"Odd," muttered Cane to himself. "I'd better step inside and see what's the matter."

The key to the bank's front door was in his pocket, so Cane used it now to open the bank. He closed the front door behind him and stood for a few seconds in the darkness, feeling strangely like a lawless intruder, even though this was the place where he worked every day.

He was about to turn on more lights when he reflected that the unusual illumination might fetch some one running, and cause a commotion for nothing. Surely the safe must be in its usual position; the electric light had merely been shifted.

Cane tipped the light backward when he reached it, and, sure enough, there was the safe, standing just where it always stood. The light had been shifted a few feet forward, just as he had suspected, so that it failed by several inches to light up the safe door.

Cane tried the safe door. It was locked,

just as it should be. Everything, so far as he could see, was all right.

"Queer," he muttered to himself. "Why should anyone want to shift the light forward." He looked at the electric cord. "It couldn't very well have been done accidentally. No, by Jove! Whoever did it, did it purposely." He saw now that a piece of common white string had been tied to the electric cord, and then to the nearest corner of the teller's cage. Thus the light had been pulled forward and a little to one side, and fastened there.

"I was the last one to leave here this afternoon," he thought, "and I certainly didn't do that."

Suspicion suddenly flamed in Cane's mind. He snapped the string in two with his strong fingers, and the light swung back to its accustomed position, lighting up the safe's door, after it finished oscillating, as it always had done.

Whirling the knob right and left, as he had when Oscar Twiss engaged a safe-deposit box, Cane threw back the restraining bolts and slowly swung open the heavy door.

Lighting a match, because the electric light failed to penetrate the big safe's interior, Cane looked at the ledge where he had laid the bank's currency and coin that afternoon—a little over thirty thousand dollars.

The ledge was empty.

"Robbed!" gasped Cane. "Good God! Who could have done it?"

At the same instant a blinding flare of light flashed into his eyes and a harsh voice commanded:

"Put 'em up!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

THE CALL

THERE'S a call that sets me a-quiver,
And thrills me with ecstasy,
A yearning that makes me shiver,
A longing that smothers me.

The office is driving me crazy,
People who talk drive me mad;
A bend where the water is lazy
Is waiting to make me glad.

I'm sick of rich food and its flavor,
Sick—I'm so spiffy and clean,
Oh, Lord, how I long for the savor
Of grub—like the pork and the bean.

I pine for the odor of bacon,
That's kissing the morning air,
And coffee that's just in the "makin'"—
Gee, but I'm useless—for fair.

I'm tired of noise and the talking,
I'm weary of tales of woe;
My soul by the river is walking,
So I'm closing my desk to go—
FISHING!

Steve Hogan.

Go to It Cowboy!

By GEORGE M JOHNSON

Author of "The Range Rider," "Fenced Water," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

THE LOST MINE.

EVENING in the desert borderland. A brooding stillness as of some vast solitude, not broken even by the doleful howl of a stray coyote. Faint in the west still glowed the after-sunset fires, pitiful remnants of that splendid symphony of barbaric colors which had lately marked the passing of another day.

Two or three stars, braver than their fellows, already peered adventurously down through the unclouded softness of gathering dusk. Harsh outlines of rugged topography were blurred by that soft magic to a confusion whose very vagueness carried a touch of unreality—of wild, unearthly beauty.

In a hollow among the rocks blazed a cheerful little fire, and by it lounged two men, enjoying the inevitable smoke that follows an evening meal, their faces imperfectly illumined by the fitful flare. One of these men, it seemed, was quite young; twenty, or perhaps twenty-five—surely no older.

A likable-appearing chap, you might have said, in spite of the slightly disagreeable impression given by his eyes, which were small, jet black in color, and placed a trifle too close together. Yet under the influence of his good-naturedly superior smile—and he smiled often—one could readily, unless he were overparticular, forgive that small matter of the eyes. This young man now relighted his dead pipe with an ember, and spat into the fire.

"I want to say this much, Easy," said he, "and then I'm through. It's a lucky thing for you we agreed to hit it off together this trip. You know I ain't exactly a greenhorn at the prospecting game, if I do say so. I wasn't born yesterday, and I'm acquainted with this country mighty well. If we make a strike, you can thank your lucky stars and Sam Pickett."

His companion nodded thoughtfully, as though conceding the truth of this statement. Easy Hollister! Easy in name and in disposition, one of those born to follow leadership as surely as others are born to lead.

Older by ten years or more than Pickett, of wider experience in the search for gold, possessing withal a far keener knowledge of ores and minerals, Hollister was yet not unwilling to be guided by this younger partner of his. You could have found no fault with Easy Hollister's eyes, whatever doubts might have been awakened in your mind by Pickett's.

Easy's were blue, and they glanced steadily out at the world with a guileless candor that seemed disposed to take others at their own valuation.

"Yes, Sam," said Hollister slowly, "I reckon I'm lucky to be with you. I've had poor luck with my pardners, seems like. I can't always locate a good one."

"I'll say you can't; but you got him now, Easy, and I'm steering you right. See?"

The other nodded again, silently.

"I don't know why I hooked up with you, Easy," Pickett went on frankly. "Some folks would likely call me a damned fool. Some fellows would want a pardner that wasn't so slow—one with more get-up-and-get to him. But you're all right, old timer. We'll trail on fine together."

"Sure we will, Sam; I know that."

"You just follow my lead, Easy. I know where I'm going."

"I reckon you do, Sam." Hollister paused, sucking meditatively at his pipe. "It's been a mighty lucky lead, too, Sam. I ain't taking any credit away from you. I don't want you to think that, Sam. Not for a minute. Course, I *might* 've had a notion to head this way myself, but that ain't certain—not at all. It's a lucky lead, and you're the guy that deserves the credit."

Hollister ceased speaking, gazing toward the fire in temporary abstraction. Sam Pickett stiffened to sudden interest, staring curiously at his comrade.

"What the hell are you barking about, anyway, Easy?" he demanded. "What's all this about credit? Credit for what?"

Hollister shifted his gaze from the fire, his eyes returning the other's stare.

"You mind that night in the saloon at Black Eagle?" he inquired. "The crowd got to talking about lost mines, and somebody was telling of the desert rat that located him a big strike. Thirty years ago it was. The Apaches hopped him after he'd found it. You remember, Sam?"

"Sure, I remember," Pickett cried huskily, held under the spell of a nameless, intangible thrill in Hollister's tone. "What of it?"

"He was in a bad way, that poor old desert rat, when folks found him," Hollister went on. "The red devils did their work swift and thorough. He didn't live more'n an hour or so, but he lived long enough to tell about his strike—a ledge of rich ore. And he had samples of rotten quartz to prove it. Rotten quartz just fair busting with yellow gold. You recall that, don't you, Sam?"

Breathlessly Sam Pickett nodded.

"Folks figured from his story that the place must be about fifty miles southwest from Black Eagle—about where we are now, Sam. You recollect what he told 'em marked the golden ledge? It was a white cross, where two veins of milky quartz run together, and down below 'em, close to the base of the cliff, another quartz vein, the one his rich samples come from. Lots of men started after that vein. Some came back, and some never did; but nobody ever found the lode—and all these years it's waited, all these years it's been there.

"Seemed likely the wind had drifted loose sand over the base of that ledge and covered up the gold and the white cross. The wind could do that, Sam, and then some time it could blow the sand away again, leaving a golden fortune for the first person that chanced to spot it. *I found that white cross to-day,* Sam, and the gold was still there!"

Pickett leaped to his feet, fingers savagely gripping at Hollister's shoulder.

"You gone crazy, Easy?" he snarled. "Been mixing purple loco with your tobacco?"

Hollister shook the hand away.

"No, Sam," was the calm rejoinder, and his coolness was in striking contrast with Pickett's feverish eagerness, "I ain't crazy. Take a look at this."

From a pocket he took a small handful of loose specimens, extending them for inspection.

It was weathered quartz, and the gleam of the fire was reflected yellow in Sam Pickett's eyes from flecks and tiny bits of gold with which the ore was shot.

"It's real gold, Sam," Hollister said, as Pickett, with a muttered oath, bent close to the blaze the better to scrutinize the mineral. "No pyrite there."

"When did you find it, Easy?" Pickett demanded, presently straightening up.

"While I was out with the scattergun this afternoon, killing a rabbit for our supper."

"Huh!" A suspicious light glowed momentarily in Pickett's close-set eyes. "You kept it pretty dark, strikes me. Weren't planning to hold out on me, were you, Easy?"

"Why, no, Sam—of course I wasn't. Ain't we pardners? Don't we split everything fifty-fifty?"

"Yeah, that was the agreement; but it seems kinda funny, you waiting three-four hours to break the news."

The shadow of suspicion still lurked in Pickett's eyes.

"You hadn't ought to act that way, Sam." Easy Hollister was genuinely pained at his partner's poorly concealed distrust. "I planned to give you a nice little surprise to-night after grub pile, just like I did. Goshamighty! I wouldn't hold out on a pal. Nobody before ever accused me of being that kind of a guy."

"Oh, well, all right," Pickett conceded ungraciously. "Where is she, Easy?"

"Up the first branch of this draw where we're camped. I'll show you in the morning, soon's it's light. It's sure worth seeing, Sam."

Pickett juggled the specimens in his hand, shrewdly testing their weight.

"A big ledge, was it, Easy—or mebby just a pocket?"

"No pocket, Sam. She's a ledge, and a sure-'nuff buster. Looks like we'll be rich."

"I guess we will, if we really have hit that there lost mine. It's like I was telling you, Easy. You were in luck to team up with me. Wasn't it me that brought you into this country? I'm asking."

"Sure it was, Sam. I reckon we'd never have found the strike if it wasn't for you. I reckon that's so—I'm mighty glad about this, I tell you. It ain't so much for myself, Sam, but you see I've got a boy. A little shaver he is—six years old—no, seven—come to think of it. He's on a ranch with his uncle, up in Wyoming."

"Where's your wife, Easy?" Pickett voiced the question in idle indifference. His thoughts were far away, on gold, and what could be done with it—in certain directions. Sam had pretty definite ideas on that last. "I never knew you were married, Easy," he added.

"My wife's dead, Sam."

A poignant emotion—as of agony at a loss too vast to be expressed in words—quivered in Hollister's voice. He removed

a thin gold band from his little finger, affectionately regarding it in the firelight.

"This here's her wedding ring, Sam—the ring I gave her when we was married. Inside it says: 'From J. H. to L. W.' Her name was Laura. From Jim Hollister to Laura White. They didn't call me Easy Hollister then," apologetically.

"Laura died when Bert, my boy, was born. It near killed me, Sam, and for awhile I couldn't feel right toward the little cuss. Seemed as if he'd taken her away from me. I just had to duck out. I been a lot different—since—it happened. Ain't had any ambition, seemed like. Just didn't care how things broke.

"But finally I come to see it wasn't Bert's fault his mother died. He couldn't help that, Sam, no more'n I could. God did it. I don't know why, but I reckon He does. Mebby He knows it was for the best.

"Once a year I been going back to the ranch to see Bert. I'm thinking more of him all the time, Sam, and I reckon he likes his daddy pretty well too. He's living on the place where his mother was born, but being there even for a little spell was just like pulling my heart out by the roots. I couldn't stand it. But last time I promised Bert that before long I'd be coming to get him, soon's he was big enough. Now with all this gold we've found I can buy me a ranch in some good section of range country and stock it with steers. Little Bert and I'll live there together. It 'll be pretty nice, too, Sam, after I been knocking around alone for so long."

Sam Pickett merely grunted, hardly listening to his partner's story.

"I ain't done the right thing by my boy. I can see that now. I reckon folks might say I'd been a measly sort of dad to him, going off the Lord knows where, and leaving his mother's family to raise him. But I'm telling you, Sam, that's all over now."

And in the meantime Sam Pickett was thinking:

"Why the hell couldn't I have found that gold ledge instead of this damned, long-winded fool? Chances are they ain't more gold than one fellow could rightly use."

The following morning Hollister conducted his partner to the scene of the discovery—a low, inconspicuous cliff marked by the white cross where the two worthless veins intercepted, and at the bottom of the cliff itself another band of quartz, this one gleaming with the wealth of precious metal it carried. The sight brought an answering gleam into the narrow eyes of Sam Pickett.

"By the eternal, pardner!" he cried triumphantly. "We've hit it sure enough. This here's that lost mine, and no mistake. And right here, thirty odd years ago, was where the Apaches jumped the first chap that found it."

Half fearfully Pickett glanced around, as though almost expecting a troupe of yelling, painted savages to dash in upon them.

"Just what I told you," was Easy's mild assent. "Guess they's enough for both of us, Sam—more'n enough. And they won't any Apaches jump us."

"Sure they's enough," Pickett agreed heartily, but he turned aside lest his partner read the covetous greed in those close-set, jet-black eyes of his.

"I been thinking things over, Sam," Hollister resumed. "We can't swing this alone—it's too all-fired big a proposition for us to handle. We got to have capital—machinery, and all that. But it 'll be a dead cinch to raise plenty of money, Sam, with this prospect. It 'll speak for itself."

"Guess you're right, Easy, but let's start by finding how much of a layout we got here. We'd best open up the ledge for a ways—see how she looks. Then we can slap on our location notices and record her."

Hollister readily fell in with this suggestion, the wisdom of which was fully apparent, and the two fortunate prospectors set themselves to the task of clearing away some of the loose rock débris along the base of the cliff—talus, weathered from the slope above, mixed with quantities of wind-blown sand.

Sam Pickett's brain was even busier than his hands, the while their labors uncovered a long buried seam of gold-shot, rotten quartz of almost fabulous richness. It was truly a stupendous discovery—a veritable Golconda.

Dark thoughts lurked in Pickett's mind as he toiled. The mere notion of having to share all this wealth with a partner irked him terribly. What had Easy Hollister done to deserve it? Nothing at all. It was sheer bull luck that had led his rambling footsteps to the find—luck and Sam Pickett. Alone, Easy would never have made the discovery, for their journeying in this particular direction had been at his partner's suggestion, not his.

So Pickett reasoned, and having reasoned thus far it was not difficult for him to carry the train of thought yet further. He had, indeed, long been considering a prospecting trip into this very country, before the chance encounter with Easy Hollister and the partnership which developed from that meeting.

It was easily conceivable—in fact, wholly probable, as Pickett chose to regard the affair—that he might have discovered the lost mine himself, in which case there would have been no occasion for a split. Sam's selfish, scheming brain bore no gratitude to the man whose stroke of fortune had lifted them both from poverty to riches in an instant; instead, he harbored a bitter resentment, a grudge that all could not be his.

Pickett saw that raising the required capital would compel them to dispose of at least a half interest in the property, and his bitterness increased.

"That leaves me only a quarter," he aggrievedly told himself. "It ain't enough—not anywhere enough. Why should I give half to this damned old blundering skate? He don't deserve it, horning in on my trip the way he did. I didn't want him along, anyway."

Sam was becoming conscious of an increasing animosity toward Hollister as they worked side by side. Easy talked more freely than before—of his boy, and of the hopes and ambitions he held for that boy's future.

And as Hollister became more talkative, Pickett in turn grew more taciturn, replying to his partner's speech by noncommittal grunts or not replying at all. Pickett must have betrayed some little of this feeling in those narrow, close-set eyes; but Easy failed to notice it, making the fatal blunder of thinking that this scurvy partner of his was as honest as himself.

So the blind anger continued to smolder in Pickett's brain, and Hollister unconsciously ever fanned it to greater heat. Strangely enough Sam was disgusted and put out with his comrade because the latter was so simple and trusting.

"The damned fool!" he muttered vindictively. "Hasn't got the brains of a locoed sage hen. The damned, chuckleheaded galoot! Why the Lord ever turned out a nit-wit like him is too much for me!"

What followed came on the spur of impulse, an impulse born from hours of malevolent brooding. Hollister, his back to Sam, bent over, grunting as he pried with a crowbar at a bowlder.

Pickett drew his pistol, and without a second's hesitation sent a bullet into his unsuspicious companion.

Even as he pressed the trigger Sam was suddenly oppressed by tardy fears—would have withheld the shot. But it was then too late.

Hollister slumped forward to the bottom of the shallow excavation in which he worked, eyes turning back to glare into Sam's as he fell. For one brief instant the murderer read in them the hell that Easy was living through in that fleeting second, as full realization at last swept over him in a bitter, resistless flood.

"Why, Sam!" he cried reproachfully. "I never thought you'd do that, Sam!"

Hollister's right hand groped backward in a feeble effort to reach the gun on his own hip, but the clutching fingers closed on empty space, while Pickett, pistol in hand, watched, a grim smile curling his thin, cruel lips.

Hollister recognized his own impotence; accepted the cards as fate had dealt them out. But his mild blue eyes—mild no longer—now blazed with the hardness of tempered steel, sending a swift spasm of superstitious terror through the craven soul of the killer.

"I'll get you for this, some day, Sam Pickett!" and the words hissed in the snarl of a wild animal. "Dead or alive, I'll get you. Don't forget it, Sam. I—"

But Easy Hollister could not finish. He

lay dead, there by the wonderful gold deposit that had promised so much and given so little.

Pickett waited an instant, still watchful. Then he bent over, searching the garments of his victim.

"Damn the luck!" he growled. "It ain't there. What the hell could he have done with it, I wonder? Oh, well, don't make any difference, I reckon. All I got to do is play my cards close. I can't go wrong—with this hand."

Sam Pickett experienced little difficulty in playing his cards. In due season he returned to civilization, reporting the accidental death of his partner in a fall from a precipice.

His explanation was freely accepted, for, after all, the passing of some wandering prospector is no unusual occurrence. Who was there to inquire more particularly into the details, or ask questions that might perchance prove embarrassing to the dead man's partner?

After a time Sam Pickett vanished again, and when he reappeared, months later, it was to record a wondrously rich ledge of golden quartz, the result of his last prospecting trip.

"A lucky guy, that Pickett," folks said, content to let it go at that.

Why should the breath of suspicion attach itself to Sam Pickett, because his partner happened to get killed just before Sam's quest for gold proved successful. And so Pickett went his way.

Bait cast into the Eastern money market brought a big fish to net. Capital was forthcoming—as Sam had foreseen—at the price of a half interest in the quartz ledge. Sam found himself rich, well spoken of in the section as a shrewd, successful mining man.

Years passed by. Some few admired Sam Pickett; hangers-on, these last, jackals—the type of men whose admiration is always on the market. Others—more of them—envied him his unearned prosperity. But not one of those who envied Sam Pickett—or who merely regarded him with indifference—suspected that he lived under the shadow of an awful, sinister dread.

Often, at night, he awoke dripping with perspiration, the echo of a pistol shot ringing in his ears. In his dreams he had again reënacted that hideous scene of years before.

Again he found himself standing by a shallow excavation at the base of the cliff—where now elaborate machinery sent forth its thunderous stamp by night and day—gun in hand, staring at the body of his murdered partner. The last bitter curse of a dead man seemed always to pursue him.

"I'll get you for this, some day, Sam Pickett. Dead or alive, I'll get you. Don't forget it, Sam!"

And Pickett was in no danger of ever forgetting.

Sometimes he awoke, trembling in the darkness, conscious of the presence in his room of some intangible evil. A relentless specter was ever lurking on his trail—the unappeased spirit of Easy Hollister, come back from the grave to collect his debt. Sam could see him. The dead man's eyes were horrible.

Days were not so bad with Sam Pickett. Then he was with other people, friends and acquaintances. He derived a comfort from their presence. But nights were different. Sam Pickett was never alone at night if he could help it.

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGER ARRIVES.

A SOLITARY rider pulled in his mount at the crest of the divide, gazing down on a far-flung stretch of rolling grassland that reached onward in vast, limitless swells, like mighty waves of an immeasurable ocean. For a time he relaxed in the saddle, idly surveying the country spread before him.

"Not bad at all, Rusty," he remarked aloud. "As a range section I'd say it shapes up right good. Mebby we'll be stopping hereabouts for a spell."

The rider was dressed in conventional cow-puncher trappings, from broad-brimmed Stetson to sheepskin chaps, with, of course, the inevitable six-gun slung low on his thigh. His varied accouterments

were all of the best quality obtainable, though bearing signs of hard usage. A typical cowboy, you might have said—and yet there was something about the set of his lean, firm jaws; something in the level, appraising glance from his eyes, blue with the matchless turquoise of a western sky; something in the very attitude of lithe, careless grace with which his body swung to the motions of his horse; something, in short, that set him definitely apart from the ruck of cow hands content with their forty a month and found. Clearly here was no ordinary range rider.

With a dexterity born of much practice, he twisted himself a cigarette from the bag of tobacco carried in the pocket of his flannel shirt. He paused in the act of striking a match, his roving glance attracted by something down the slope.

A second rider had appeared—a rider who seemed to be having trouble with his horse.

Our puncher's lips parted in a grin of appreciation.

"Stay with 'im, cowboy!" he yelled, waving his hat in mocking salutation.

Then suddenly the expression of cordial interest dropped from his face, replaced by lively concern.

"Good Lord, it's a girl!" he gasped. "That damned cayuse will kill her! What the hell—"

Under the sharp stab of his master's spurs Rusty went plunging down the declivity like a bullet. To the cowboy's expert eye it was apparent that this unknown girl was in dire straits.

Her right foot, he could perceive, had slipped through the stirrup, a predicament which makes it hopelessly impossible to stay with a fractious broncho, while to be thrown means certain death. The rider, his foot thus trapped, is dragged to a horrible end beneath the thudding hoofs of the maddened pony.

The rescuer reached the scene not a second too soon. The girl's horse reared viciously upward, forefeet pointed toward the stars. His fair rider had lost her grip on the reins, which dangled free as she clung desperately to the saddle pommel.

Then like a charging thunderbolt came Rusty, even as the girl was snapped from her precarious seat by the frenzied plunge of her mount. She lurched sidewise and fell, her right foot still held in the stirrup. One strong arm caught her as she slipped limply from the saddle; another reached up to the bridle of the rearing broncho, dragging the brute downward with resistless force.

"Behave, damn you!" the rider grunted savagely. "One false move, and I'll put a bullet through your brain!"

Trembling, as though it understood this threat, the horse subsided, eyes rolling wildly. An instant later the puncher stood on the ground, the girl whom he had saved beside him.

"Well?" said he, with a pleasant grin, as if stunts of this sort were an everyday occurrence in his care-free young life.

Her smile answered his, though it was a bit forced. Her face was still pale from the shock of her recent experience.

"I'm obliged, stranger," said she. "It was careless of me to get in a jam like that, wasn't it? You must think I'm a terrible rider."

She was an unusually pretty girl, and the tinge of color that flooded her tanned cheeks as she perceived the frank admiration in the glance of her companion made her all the more attractive.

"Why, now, ma'am!" he exclaimed deprecatingly, "I wouldn't think you were terrible at riding or anything else. Not a-tall. Offhand I'd venture the opinion that you were mighty nice—and sure easy on the optics."

She dimpled, clearly not displeased.

"But that's only because you don't know me."

"I'm afraid I don't, ma'am." To which came the hopeful addition: "But it ain't my fault. I'm counting on making up for that unfortunate ignorance right soon."

"Who are you anyway?" was her frank inquiry. "I thought I'd seen all the riders in this region, but I don't recall you."

"You wouldn't, ma'am, being's I'm new hereabouts. Foster's the name I go by, ma'am. Al Foster. You don't need to use the last part of it, though."

"Indeed!" the young lady rejoined, just

a bit stiffly. "Aren't you taking things for granted?"

"Why, naturally! I'm taking it for granted you and me are going to be good friends. Which being the case, why bother about formality? My friends 'most always call me Al." He paused suggestively, and when the girl failed to rise to the occasion, added: "I didn't quite catch the name."

Quite coolly she surveyed him, her nose uptilting with a trace of superciliousness; an air, so to speak. But it was wasted on young Mr. Al Foster, who grinned so infectiously that her lips just had to crinkle in the tiniest of smiles.

"My name is *Miss* Janice Day," she told him, with a telling emphasis on the *Miss*. Al Foster's lips puckered in a whistle of disbelief.

"Not Janice Day, daughter of Stormy Day!" he ejaculated.

"Miss Janice Day, daughter of Frank P. Day," she corrected him.

Al shook his head.

"That don't seem possible," he muttered, as if to himself. Curiosity overcame her.

"What do you mean by that? Why isn't it possible, Mr. Foster?"

"Al, you mean," he said casually. Then before she could reply he hurried on. "I've heard of Janice Day, and I heard she was a regular stuck-up snob that had high notions in her pretty little head, account of her dad making him a lot of money growing steers. I can see you ain't that way a-tall, so either you ain't Janice Day or they's a big mistake somewheres. It's too much for me."

Miss Janice gasped at such unheard of frankness on the part of a stranger—even though a privileged stranger. Her face turned crimson.

"Why—you—" she sputtered, almost crying with rage. "Oh, if I was only a man as big and strong as you are, wouldn't I give you a lesson you'd remember!" But Al only grinned at her in exasperating good nature.

"You're fresh and impudent!" Janice stormed. "I h—hate you!" She stamped a shapely little foot on the ground by way of emphasis.

So intent were the two in this highly diverting exchange that both had failed to note the swift approach of a horseman, who now leaped from his mount beside them. Evidently he had overheard Miss Day's last few spirited remarks.

"What's the trouble here, Janice?" he demanded brusquely. "This fellow annoying you?" and he glared angrily at Al Foster.

Al found himself gazing into the face of a man considerably older than he was—a man, that is, of about forty, or a trifle more.

The newcomer was handsome in a way. His full cheeks were smooth shaven; a neatly trimmed mustache adorned his upper lip, jet black in color, as was his hair and eyes, though the hair of his head was here and there tinged with gray.

His eyes attracted one, repelled one, rather. There was something wrong with them, something that the beholder strove instinctively to fathom—and failed. They were set a little too close together.

Silently Janice and Al Foster faced him, spellbound at the unexpectedness of his arrival.

"Has this fellow been annoying you, Janice?" he repeated.

Slowly the red flush of anger drained from her face. Al, watching narrowly, could perceive no great warmth of welcome in the glance she bestowed on the intruder; rather disappointment, perhaps, as if the interruption were not wholly desired.

"No," she said shortly, "he hasn't."

The stranger was somewhat discomfited by this reply.

"But I thought—from what you were saying to him—"

"You don't need to think anything," she snapped in unkind interruption.

"But who is this man?" he persisted.

"Oh, excuse me, gentlemen!" the girl murmured, half mockingly. "I forgot you hadn't met. Sam, this is a new friend of mine, Mr. Al Foster. Mr. Foster, meet Mr. Pickett."

The two men curtly acknowledged this introduction, not offering to shake hands. They seemed to be measuring each other, as duelists about to cross swords.

"You're a stranger here, Foster, I believe," Sam Pickett said coolly.

"Yes, Pickett, I am," Al retorted, with equal coolness. "But I don't aim to stay strange very long."

He affected the same air of patronizing superiority as Pickett's, imitating it to perfection. That, and the studied indifference of Al's attitude, made his reply perilously close to deliberate insult.

Sam Pickett scowled in resentment, but Janice spoke up quickly.

"Mr. Foster just saved my life," and in a few brisk sentences she sketched the incident which had led to their meeting.

Al's quick thought and deft action lost nothing in her telling. The scowl faded from Sam's face, though slowly.

"Mighty lucky for Janice you came along when you did," he said grudgingly to Al. "Lots of folks would be sorry if anything happened to Janice Day." He smiled meaningly at the girl. "I could mention one in particular."

"Her dad, you mean, I reckon," Al said dryly, whereat Sam's scowl reappeared. By an effort, he spoke in a friendly tone.

"Likely you'll be riding on into Ore City now. You might drink on me when you hit an oasis." His fingers explored a vest pocket, bringing to light a gold piece. This he tossed toward Al. "Shall we go, Janice?"

The gold coin flashed through the air, glinting in the sunlight. Al watched it with a sardonic smile, making no effort to catch the money. Pickett shrugged his shoulders, turning to the girl. "Come, Janice," he said.

"You don't have to rush off, Miss Janice," Al remarked mildly. "I ain't in any hurry. Fact is, I wasn't planning to go quite yet."

"We are," Pickett informed him. "Miss Day appreciates your services, but she has no further need of them. Good-by."

"Strikes me the young lady herself don't seem to have much say-so in this business," Al drawled. "You riding herd on her—or something?"

"Are you looking for trouble?" Pickett snapped, turning sharply.

"Me? Why, no. I don't claim to be a trouble hound, but I sure don't duck when she's forced on me. That what you aiming to do, hombre? I'd just like to get it straight."

Janice Day looked from one to the other of the two men, uncertain. She seemed to take a mischievous delight in the vibrant tension that underlay their words, yet at the same time dreading lest it might go too far. In the face of Al's provocative challenge Sam could not well withdraw.

"I can supply all the trouble you'll want—and more," he said savagely.

"And I'll be Johnny-on-the-spot to slam her back at you—with interest," was Al's cold rejoinder. "Howsomever, this ain't quite the kind of talk for a lady's ears. I crave a few words with you off to one side."

"Come along, then," and Pickett himself led the way. Janice looked quite disappointed at being thus deserted.

"I want to ask you just one question," Al growled, when they were at a safe distance. He made no attempt to speak with any degree of suave politeness. "What license you got to pick out Miss Day's friends for her? Can't she speak for herself?"

"I'm expecting to marry Miss Janice," Sam Pickett told him, with a dignity befitting such an announcement.

"Well, well!" Al grinned. "Quite some little expecter, ain't you? But that don't interest me a-tall, hombre. Miss Day's expectations strike me as being more to the point, and from what I saw when you blew in on our little party just now, you sure made a mighty bad third. Seems like I'd know, speaking personal, when to take a hint. But, gosh, some fellows never do. Some folks got a hide tougher and thicker'n a ten-year-old steer's. Likely you're built that way."

Pickett's face grew livid with passion under this cool taunt. Instinctively, his hand twitched, as if he were about to reach for the gun on his thigh. The cowboy grinned derisively.

"Go on, hombre," he invited. "Make your little play. You start first and I'll follow, *but I'll beat you there!* Even though I'd hate to salivate you with the young lady watching. Trouble is, you're

afraid to try. You know that, and what's more, you know I know it."

Pickett strove, with a notable lack of success, to outglare this demoralizing young puncher who had crossed his trail, and who was so damnably cool, confident, and self-possessed.

Unfortunately, Sam's glaring apparatus was not in first class working order at that crucial instant. He sought refuge in weak bluster.

"I'm not going to bother with you," he growled. "Keep away from me if you know what's good for you."

"That's a thing I'll sure be glad to do," Al promised cordially. "It won't be any hardship. Thank God, I can choose my own company. I'm mighty fussy about the folks I trail with."

"Don't choose Janice Day's company." Pickett's tone was threatening.

But young Mr. Al Foster hardly appeared to hear that last command; he was staring back toward the spot where they had abandoned Janice, a mixture of chagrin and comical amusement registered on his pleasant face.

"I'll be dog-goned!" he murmured. "While the king and the jack squabble, the queen vamoses!"

Pickett looked in his turn; Miss Day had seemingly grown weary of waiting while the two cavaliers discussed at length her connection with their affairs. She was now rapidly disappearing in the distance, already so far away, in fact, that pursuit was useless.

"Serves me right," Al Foster grumbled testily. "I never ought to have wasted time talking with you," and he eyed Sam Pickett with extreme distaste. "I got to be more careful in the future."

"That's the truest thing you ever said, young fellow," Sam Pickett heatedly rejoined. "The best thing you can do right now is to get on your cayuse and ride him straight out of this section. You need a one-way ticket."

"That a threat?" Al inquired in keen interest.

"Yes," Sam said, "you can take it as a threat."

Al rolled himself a cigarette, while pondering this. With unusual care he shaped the tiny cylinder, passed the tip of his tongue along the paper's edge, and then twisted the end. Slowly, deliberately, he struck a match.

"I didn't hit this country you're bossing so casual-like," Al Foster said, "till yesterday."

He paused to apply the burning match to the end of his smoke. Carefully he extinguished the match, flipping it away. Then he gravely examined the glowing point of the cigarette. Sam Pickett, boiling with rage, might have been ten miles away instead of four feet.

"I wasn't right sure then whether to stick around awhile or not," Al at last resumed. "Now they's two reasons why I've decided to stick. You're one of 'em."

Al broke off to let that sink in, taking a reflective drag at his cigarette, after which he added succinctly: "Janice Day's the other. You can take that any way you damned please!"

CHAPTER III.

SCRAPS OF PAPER.

IT was a middling lively evening at Ore City, and in particular within the confines of an establishment known as the Pay Dirt. The bar, which extended along one side of the principal room, was being patronized by a steady succession of thirsty souls, both cowboys and miners, for Ore City boasted an ideal location from the business standpoint—mining country on one side; range on the other.

Various games of chance—poker, Mexican monte, roulette, and others—were running full blast. Money seemed fairly plentiful, and it was well known that a chap could always get action, of a kind, for his coin at the Pay Dirt.

Mort Degnan, proprietor of this flourishing and popular resort, moved about among the crowd, keeping a watchful eye on the progress of events. Now and then he paused to exchange a word or two of greeting with some acquaintance.

Buck Farley, Degnan's right hand man, had stepped out for a few minutes, and

during his absence the owner himself was on duty as manager.

Buck presently reappeared, and noting his henchman's return, Mort Degnan started back toward the privacy of his office at one corner of the room. Farley, however, came directly through the crowd to join his boss. Degnan waited.

"What's up?" was his curt demand.

"I just bumped into Sam Pickett," Farley said in a low tone. "He wants to see you about something. I told him you'd probably be out later on this evening, but he said for you to wait here for him. He'll be around directly."

"Didn't say what he wanted, did he?" Degnan inquired, biting the end from a cigar.

"No, chief, he didn't." Farley's keen eye was fixed on a half intoxicated miner, who seemed about to start something at the expense of the bar fixtures.

"All right. I'll wait a few minutes for him," and Degnan turned to enter his private office.

Buck Farley thereupon proceeded to give the troublesome hard rock man an expert demonstration of what, in Eastern circles, has come to be termed, quite elegantly, the bum's rush. It was at the conclusion of this quaint ceremony that Sam Pickett arrived.

"Degnan still here?" he asked.

Farley meticulously flecked an imaginary bit of dust from one sleeve, jerking his head toward the private office.

"He's waiting for you. I told him you were coming."

Pickett threaded his way through the card tables and then around the end of the bar to Degnan's office, which he entered, carefully closing the door.

"Howdy, Sam!" and Mort set out a bottle of special stock, with two glasses. "What's on your mind?"

"One or two things." He tasted the whisky. "That's damned good liquor, Mort. Better'n you sell across the bar."

"Of course it is," and Mort Degnan winked. "I save my real stuff for those who can appreciate it. Why waste good booze on that bunch out yonder?" and he nodded toward the bar. "Those fellows will drink anything you give 'em. They'll pay as much for rot-gut, and not know the difference. Here's how, Sam!" and he drank. Then, wiping his lips with the back of a hand: "Buck said you wanted to see me."

"Yes—" Sam paused to light a cigar. "What do you know about Stormy Day's financial situation, Mort?"

Degnan raised his eyebrows expressively.

"Stormy been trying to borrow money from you?" he asked by way of answer.

"Not exactly, but I've got reasons of my own for wanting to know."

"Hm!" Degnan grunted non-committally.

"This is strictly confidential, Mort," Pickett went on. "Just between you and me. What's your opinion of him?"

"Stormy's had a bad run of luck the last year or two," said Degnan. "Longer'n that, when you come right down to it. Most folks in the cow business had a bad streak, but things hit Day harder'n the rest. Seems like everything coming he got. Dry weather, Texas fever, lumpy jaw, and what not. Rustlers cleaned out quite a bunch of his steers, too. All in all it's sort of broken the old fellow's spirit. Been hitting old John Barleycorn pretty hard, too, lately; so they tell me. Stormy's not the man he used to be."

"Humph!" Pickett snorted contemptuously. "Never was. I ain't ever been able to see where he got the rep he's enjoyed as a hell raiser. He was just lucky, up to a point, and now he's through. Stormy Day's shot his bolt. How much of his paper you got, Mort?"

"How you know I've got any?"

"That's easy," and Sam Pickett laughed. "What's it tot up to, Mort?"

"Fifteen thousand in demand notes," Degnan confessed ruefully. "What you say is true enough, I reckon. Likely that paper I hold ain't worth twenty-five hundred."

"I'll give you three thousand for the notes," Pickett said. "I'm picking up a little of his paper, here and there."

"What's the big idea? You figure Stormy Day's going to stage a comeback?"

"I should say not. He's a hell of a long

way from a comeback. You know they've been rumors going around for some time now that the old fellow was in over his head. I've been pulling a little gumshoe stuff; had inquiries made about the notes he's got out. Comes to at least seventy thousand that I know of, and they may be more'n that. Probably is. According to the best dope I've got, the steers wearing his brand wouldn't bring much over thirty thousand, if as much, at present market prices. What land and buildings he owns would fall a long way short of making up the difference."

"Bad as that, eh?" Degnan mused. "Worse than I thought. I'm sorry to hear it."

"Yes, you can kiss your fifteen thousand good-by."

"The fifteen thousand is only part. They's another angle to the proposition, Sam. This range is on the skids, the way it's going now, though they's a good chance it 'll pick up in time again. Right now it's showing the results of overgrazing, and if Stormy Day loses out it means an end of the Three Star brand. The outfit is gone, and its place ain't going to be filled for a long time. In good seasons that pay roll might come to four or five hundred a month, and a fat share of it I'd get, one way or another. One outfit like the Three Star means a lot of business to me."

"I hadn't thought of it that way. Looks like you're right, Mort. But how in hell did old Stormy wish his worthless paper on you? I thought you were too wise a bird to be caught at that game."

Degnan went to the safe in one corner of his office, pawing over sundry documents for a moment until he located what he wanted.

"Here they are," he grunted, "three demand notes for five thousand apiece. The first one was to pay up his riders, when they hadn't drawn any cash for close to a year. The men were in town then, r'aring to go, and I got back the bulk of that five thousand in less than three days. The next one was to settle up after a poker game in this room one night. Day had already dropped three or four thousand in cash in that game, most of it to me personally. The third note—damned if I can remember just why I let him have the coin that time."

"Well, the notes don't stand you fifteen thousand, anyway," Pickett chuckled.

"About half that; no more," Degnan agreed. "But that don't mean I'm keen for the loss. Money's money."

"Well, why not cut your losses in two again? You can't collect a cent on the notes the way Stormy's fixed. The bank in Black Eagle holds thirty thousand of his paper, and its loan is secured by a lien on the steers. The bank is taken care of. Other holders are going to get stung proper, you among 'em."

"How about yourself? What are you planning to pull, Sam? A little charity stunt?"

"Not much. I never claimed to be any philanthropist, and I ain't planning to start at this time of life. Chances are I'll deposit your notes, and some others, in the bank for collection."

"But they can't be collected."

"That's plumb correct, Mort," Pickett agreed. "They can't be collected. Can't squeeze blood out of a turnip, they say."

"Stormy Day won't thank you for crowding him."

"I ain't after his thanks. Besides, he don't have to know who's back of it, unless I choose to tell him. It might be well for you to forget what you did with those notes, in case you care to dispose of 'em, Mort. Shall I write you a check for—say thirty-five hundred?"

"Go ahead and write, Sam. You bought something," and Degnan indifferently tossed the notes across his desk.

"Here you are, Mort," and Sam waved the check in the air to dry it. "How about a poker game later to-night?" Pickett was an inveterate poker player.

"Figure on winning your thirty-five hundred back, eh, Sam?" Degnan laughed. "Might be those notes will cost you face value when it comes time to cash in."

"Not a chance," Pickett grunted. "To-night's my lucky night."

"Can you get the crowd together?"

"Guess so. Enough of 'em anyway. Two or three of the boys I saw outside just now as I came in."

"I was going to spend the evening socially, with a certain little friend of mine," Degnan mused. "But business before pleasure. If we're going to play poker we'd better get the boys before they scatter. Come along, Sam."

Degnan stepped from the office, Pickett close behind. Suddenly the latter grabbed his companion by the arm.

"Mort," he whispered, "who's that chap?"

"What chap?" Degnan asked. "Where?"

"The one at the end of the bar; he's talking with your drink mixer."

"Oh, that guy. I don't know much about him. Heard somebody say his name was Foster."

The light from an oil lamp fell squarely on the face of the man whom Pickett indicated.

"Yes, I know his name is Foster," Sam muttered. "But who is he? Where's he from?"

"How the hell should I know? He's just some ordinary broncho peeler, I guess. The range is full of 'em. It's nothing—hey, what's the matter with you, Sam?"

"Nothing's the matter with me, Mort," Pickett mumbled. "Come on. Let's get that poker game started."

CHAPTER IV.

THE THREE STAR RANCH.

AL FOSTER cast a curious glance about him as Rusty, his horse, jogged sedately up toward the cluster of buildings that marked the Three Star headquarters.

"Though, of course, it ain't likely the young lady 'll come popping out, all excited because you're drifting into view," he told himself. "You're a-looking for something you ain't got any right to expect."

Al hardly hoped to see Janice; not at first, that is. Nor did he. The front portion of the ranch house seemed deserted, and only when Al swung around to the rear were signs of activity to be noted.

A bow-legged cow-puncher sat on a bench by the bunk house, busily engaged in weaving a latigo. He looked up in languid interest at the sounds of Rusty's hoofs on the sun-baked ground.

"Howdy!" said Al, sliding down from the saddle.

"Howdy yourself!" and the speaker hospitably moved over a trifle on the bench, which action might be taken as an invitation to join him.

Al accepted, producing the makings. Cigarettes were manufactured in silence, and duly lighted. Then Al, casually:

"Boss around?"

"House, I reckon. Job?" At this Al opened up a trifle.

"Why, yes, I was figuring on striking him for a job," he conceded. "What's the chances?" The cowboy on the bench was hereupon also moved to an outburst of loquaciousness.

"Stranger, if your life depends on nailing Stormy Day for a job wrangling steers, you want to get in touch with your favorite undertaker right pronto. Jobs at the Three Star? Sa-ay—they just ain't. That's all." The speaker's mouth snapped shut on the last word, as if he tardily regretted using so much breath.

Silence again ensued, while both smoked thoughtfully.

"Ain't taking any riders on, huh?" Al hazarded, after a decent interval.

"Not none whatever. He's letting 'em go. Me—I'm quitting next week."

"Don't need hands, eh?" Al suggested, rather obviously.

The puncher half turned to regard Al with a peculiar expression, while he went through the motions of tossing off a drink, jerking his head significantly toward the ranch house.

"Stormy Day's credit's all shot to pieces," he said. "Ain't got any money and can't raise a cent."

"I thought he was well heeled," Al objected in some surprise.

"Was once, from what they say. But Stormy Day ain't the only good man to go broke in the cow business. It's a game you can't buck if all the breaks go against you. To get rich in this section now you got to own a healthy little gold mine, like Sam Pickett, or mebby Bob Graham. Texas fever, rustlers, and a slump in market quo-

tations for beefsteak on the hoof don't mean nothing to them birds."

"Got a girl, ain't he, Stormy Day?" Al inquired, careful to let no note of personal interest creep into his voice.

"Yep. Good looker, but a mite too uppish for range country stock, if you get me. Dad's fault, I reckon. Brought her up to think she owned the earth, with the water holes all fenced. Now everything's flopped. Guess he's managed to keep his troubles away from her pretty much. I'm sorry for the kid, but they ain't nothing can be done. She's riding to a bad fall."

"Ho, hum!" and Al lazily rose from the bench, stretching. "Guess I'll tackle the boss while I'm here. He can't do any more'n throw me out on my left ear. So long!"

"Be good to yourself," said the bow-legged puncher. He squinted after Al; then grunted indifferently, and resumed work on the latigo.

Al retraced his steps to the front part of the main ranch house, where he was met by a grizzled old veteran of the unfenced range. There was no question as to this man's identity.

"Cowboy," said Al to himself, "there's your future daddy-in-law. Don't queer yourself right away quick."

The old man glanced inquiringly at him. Al perceived a peculiar, furtive, questioning look in the tanned, weather-beaten face, as of one who grapples dumbly with difficulties which he cannot wholly understand.

"Mr. Day, sir?" Al inquired.

"That's what they call me. Anything I can do for you?"

"Foster's my name; Al Foster."

Al paused an instant, to note whether the name meant anything to Stormy Day. Apparently it didn't, so that Miss Janice had not seen fit to tell her father of the little adventure centering about the bucking pony. Al was vaguely disappointed at this.

"I lately drifted into this country," he went on. "Been wondering if they was place in your outfit for another rider."

"Why did you come to me?"

"Well, I'd heard of you outside. I reckon you ain't ignorant of the fact that you're well known, Mr. Day, sir."

"When they used to speak of me as Stormy Day, eh?"

There was pride in the old man's voice; also wistful, almost pathetic yearning for the never-to-be-forgotten past—before the railroads stretched out across the great range; the times of the big cattle drives, and the wide-open, roaring cow towns that sprang up, overnight, like mushrooms, about the shipping centers.

"Everything's changed," the veteran went on absently, "and I reckon I've changed, too, but not enough or too much. Hard to tell which. I'm sorry, but I can't take you on, son. Don't need much of an outfit any more, and I've had to let some of the boys go. I've got to cut down on the expense. They's no money in the cow business—for the owners, anyway. Right now you can't get enough for a steer to make it worth the trouble to raise him and send him to market. Miners are the only folks with money to spend. Better swap your hoss and saddle for a prospector's outfit and strike into the hills. Gold there—if you can find it."

"Gosh, everybody's singing that tune, seems like," Al reflected. Then aloud: "Guess I'll stick to the cows for awhile."

Presently he left. "Poor old cuss," was his thought as he mounted Rusty. "His spirit's all shot to heck, and when a man loses that he's sure licked. That's the trouble with Stormy Day, more'n booze. A blind man can see that he ain't the kind to drink himself to death."

As Al swung out into the open country, beyond the Three Star buildings, he perceived Janice riding toward him. Quite naturally he turned Rusty in her direction. When he drew near the girl Al could not fail to note that she was laboring under strong emotion. Her face was set in hard lines, flintlike—in her eyes the gleam of unshed tears.

Janice responded with an air of embarrassment to Al's delighted greeting.

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Foster," she said hesitatingly.

"Al, you mean," he suggested. "But you're mistaken, ma'am. They ain't any reason why you should apologize to me."

"Yes, there is. I was angry at you the

other day—because of what you said about me—that I was a snob and stuck up."

"You ain't got this thing straight at all, ma'am," Al told her in shocked astonishment. "I didn't say that. I only said I'd heard folks say it, and mebby you remember I said I could see it wasn't true of you."

"But it *was* true. I *have* been stuck up. I *have* thought I was too good for this glorious country," and impetuously she flung her arms out in a wide gesture that included the vast expanse of rolling range and the majestic blue of lofty, towering peaks, hazy on the distant horizon. "Too good for it!" Janice's voice broke in a sob. "I'm not worthy to live here!"

"There, there!" Al said, soothingly. "You're all upset about something, ma'am." He had a shrewd idea as to what that something might be.

"Wouldn't you be upset to find all of a sudden that you'd been living in a fool's paradise? To think all your life that you were rich, and then find you were no better than a pauper? But that's nothing. I can stand it. It's poor old dad I'm worrying about. I feel so sorry for him. If I could only help him!"

She paused to dab at her eyes.

"You asked dad for a job, didn't you?"

Al nodded.

"Not taking on any hands right now, your dad ain't."

"Did he tell you why?" Al nodded again.

"Yes, ma'am. Sort of. Said he was cutting down on the overhead for a few months, until things picked up again. But, shucks! You don't want to get worried about a little thing like that. Price of steers will go up like a scared rocket first thing you know, and then everything will be rosy. They's times when the best of us have to pull in our belt a couple notches, 'stead of hitting up the good old nose bag. I been that way plenty times." In Al's cheerful grin was a world of encouragement.

She smiled, a bit tremulously. But when Janice Day spoke her voice was sober.

"This is more than just a temporary setback for dad, I'm afraid. It's been coming for several years, as any one but a blind little fool could have seen. I've found out a lot of unpleasant truths the last day or so. If only the blow doesn't kill dad! He's always been so proud of the part he played in opening up this country! Proud of the success he richly deserved. And now to lose everything. That's hard, when a man is as old as my father."

"I know it is," said Al sympathetically; "darned hard on him, and on you, too. But you don't want to feel too much cut up over it. Things never get so bad but what they might be a sight worse. This here's an afternoon you could use for a model. Sun's a-shining; sky's blue; and we got a couple of good hosses under us. What say we just ride off, you and me, Miss Janice, and try to forget Old Man Trouble for a couple of hours?"

Al smiled at her invitingly, whereupon the trace of a sparkle glowed in Janice Day's eyes.

"It's a bet, cowboy!" she cried. "I'd like to show you that I can ride a horse without getting tangled up in the leather or falling off."

"Good for you!" Al approved. "Let's go!" And they went.

In the meantime another visitor had arrived at the Three Star, no less a personage than Mr. Sam Pickett himself, half owner of the Hidden Fortune—richest quartz lode in that section of the Southwest.

Stormy Day greeted Pickett with no great show of enthusiasm; as a matter of fact, the old cattleman rarely displayed enthusiasm at all these days, his former animation largely replaced by a lethargy wholly unnatural to him.

"What's the good word?" Sam boomed in his big, hearty voice. Sam Pickett had put on flesh with the years, and his voice had filled out correspondingly.

"If they's any such thing as a good word, Sam," Stormy Day responded slowly, "I ain't heard of it lately. Things are bad, Sam; rotten bad."

"Come out of it, old-timer!" Pickett spoke with good natured emphasis. "You act as if the battle was over."

"Guess it is, Sam," was Day's gloomy rejoinder. "I can't seem to play the game any more. I'm at the end of my rope.

Pretty bad, ain't it, when I have to let my riders go because I can't raise money to pay wages?"

"Good Lord, man! You could borrow money."

"I've borrowed more now than I'll ever be able to pay back, and I'm through borrowing. It ain't myself I mind for, Sam. It's Janice—my baby. I've brought her up to be a regular queen of the range—and now the bubble's busted."

"See here," said Pickett in a businesslike tone, "I never dreamed things had gone as far as this with you, or I'd been tearing out here on the double prod, offering you all the money you needed. I'm hurt, by gum, really hurt, that you didn't come to me. Why, I've got more money than I know what to do with. Been tickled pink to let you have some."

"I guess you would, Sam, but you see I couldn't. You was interested in my girl. It would have looked nice, wouldn't it, for me to start right in bracing you for a stake to pull my cow business out of the mud? You'll have to admit I couldn't do that, Sam." Stormy Day's voice showed the intensity of feeling under which he labored.

"Well, perhaps you couldn't," Pickett admitted thoughtfully. "I can see your side of it."

He was quiet for a moment, gazing at the older man through his narrow, close-set black eyes. Then:

"You know how I feel toward Janice, I guess. Let's have your ideas on that subject. How do I size up as a prospective son-in-law?"

Stormy Day ran his fingers uncertainly through the grizzled hair on his head. There was no question but that Stormy Day was an old man—and looked it. He had been well on the shady side of fifty when Janice was born.

"That's a kind of awkward question to ask, Sam. Two-three years ago, when things didn't yet look so bad for me, I wouldn't have been almighty keen on having my Janice marry you. They's certain things about you, Sam, that I never cared for. That was the time when I counted on leaving my girl fifty thousand dollars or more.

"Now, when I ain't got anything to leave her but a look-back on what might have been, I'm frank to say that them little matters I didn't approve of don't seem so important. The fact that she always had money always meant a lot to Janice, even though they wasn't many chances out here to spend it. Meant a sight more'n it should, likely. I'm to blame for that, Sam. But having raised her that way, I'd feel better if she could go on along the same kind of trail. Understand, Sam, I don't give a damn for myself. It's Janice I'm thinking of all the time, and what's best for her happiness. I'd like to see her marry a rich man."

Sam Pickett strove with poor success to conceal the elation he felt. Obviously he had expected to meet opposition from Janice's father.

"Then you approve my suit?" he cried eagerly.

"I don't disapprove, Sam," Day corrected him. "That's all I'll say. The rest is up to Janice."

"So far, so good!" thought Sam Pickett to himself. Then to Day: "As a prospective member of the family I'd like to offer some of the assistance you couldn't bring yourself to ask for."

Briskly he produced a check book, but Stormy Day waved it aside, a frown on his face.

"No, Sam," he said quietly. "You mean well, I judge, but don't start any play like that again; not if you want to stay on friendly terms with me. Any money settlement by rights ought to come the other way. You want me to feel like I sold you my girl?"

Hastily Sam Pickett put away his check book.

"Excuse me," he mumbled in lame apology. "I didn't mean that offer the way it sounded, I guess."

"I know you didn't, Sam," said Stormy Day grimly. "It would be a bad occasion for you if I thought you did. They didn't hang the nickname Stormy on me for nothing."

Pickett here willingly shifted the subject to more pleasant channels.

"Where's Janice?"

"Haven't seen her since dinner," Day replied. "Probably she's taken her cayuse and ridden off somewheres. That's what she generally does."

"I won't stick around then," said Sam Pickett. "No telling when she'll be back, is there?"

"No, they ain't, Sam. She may be away for hours."

Declining Day's vague suggestion that he might hang around on the chance that Janice would return sooner than ordinarily, Sam mounted his horse, heading for Ore City.

He had covered perhaps half the distance when his gaze chanced to be attracted by two riderless horses, quietly standing a mile off to the west of the trail. In his saddlebags Pickett carried a pair of expensive binoculars, and in aimless curiosity he focused the instrument on the animals. His face flushed darkly as he recognized whose they were.

Not far away were the riders, obviously quite engrossed in each other's society. Sam Pickett watched them for a moment. Then with an oath he thrust the glasses back in their case.

"This has gone too damned far," he growled savagely. "There's one fool cowpuncher that never will be missed."

CHAPTER V.

OUT OF THE PAST.

AL FOSTER lounged before the bar of the Pay Dirt, idly sipping at a glass of liquor. Mournfully he shook his head. Slowly he raised his eyes.

"That's sure terrible whisky!" he told the barkeep.

"Best whisky you can get in town, cowboy," said that functionary, hurt in his professional pride.

"Huh!" Al grunted. "Mebby that's so, hombre. I can't check up on your information positive, but I'll say this much: if what you're purveying here and now is the best, why, may God help the poor devil who gets the town's worst!"

"Aw, go on!" the drink mixer jeered good humoredly. "You range riders don't know a decent grade of liquor when you see it."

"Try me," Al urged, "just once. Slip me a shot out of Mort Degnan's private bottle." But the bartender merely winked derisively.

At this moment a desert rat sidled unobtrusively into Al's presence. He was a walking scarecrow, on whom the beholder could only gaze in wonder, marveling what miracle served to hold that fearful collection of rags and tatters to his body.

He wore a disreputable and dirty old slouch hat, rakishly tipped to one side over a tangled mass of unkempt gray hair. A week's bristly stubble covered the scarecrow's lips and chin, and his bloodshot eyes burned feverishly from the shelter of long, bushy eyebrows.

Most desert prospectors are just a bit touched—natural results of their solitary wanderings in the uncharted, barren wasteland—and this individual seemed to be no exception.

"What's the matter with the whisky?" he muttered in a cracked old voice.

Al Foster was fairly caught—and he admitted it with a grin as he waved an invitation toward the bottle from which his own recent libation had been poured.

"We'll let you decide, old-timer," said he, and the bar attendant set out another glass. "Fill her up; let's have your verdict."

The desert relic required no urging. Eagerly he poured, not stopping till the glass was brim full. He crooked his elbow, leering roguishly at Al.

"How!" he grunted briefly, and drank.

He gulped under the sting of the fiery stuff, blinked furiously, nearly choked—but managed to come up victorious. It was a narrow squeeze, however.

"What about the stuff?" Al grinned. "Pretty raw, wouldn't you say? Got to have a copper-plated, double-riveted stomach to stand that. What?"

"Best whisky I ever drank," declared the prospector loyally. "What say we punish another round?"

"Just one," said Al.

The ancient relic lingered over his second glass, becoming confidential.

"I kin see you're a sensible, hard-headed feller," he told Al in his cracked whisper, "and I'm making you a proposition. I got a line on a prospect over beyond the Telescope Hills. Trouble is, son, I'm broke. Yes, sir, busted—flatter'n a side-winder. Do you figure you could scare up a grub-stake?"

Al shook his head positively.

"Nothing doing," said he.

"Oh, well, no offense." A brief pause, while the glass was lifted to his lips. "You wouldn't think, to look at me, that I was unlucky? Would you now, stranger?"

"You don't look very damned prosperous, for a fact," Al said frankly.

"No? Mebby I don't. Fact is, I ain't. No use in lying to you and claiming I am. I admit it. But I'm unlucky, stranger; just plain unlucky. I come within six months or so of making the richest strike this country ever saw. You don't believe that, do you? It's a fact, just the same."

He finished off the glass of raw liquor, gulping it in noisy appreciation, while Al surveyed him in indulgent contempt.

"You wouldn't want to buy a gold ring, would you, son?" the desert rat presently continued, with an envious glance at the whisky bottle, which the bartender had pointedly placed in the rack behind the counter. "A gold ring. I been saving this ring for luck, but I'm broke and I got to raise some money. Besides, I reckon that ring ain't bringing me no luck—except mebby some hard luck. Want to buy it, son?"

Al shook his head indifferently, and moved away, tired of the old fellow's society and his rambling conversation. He went to the roulette wheel, risking a few coins, accepting the inevitable loss philosophically. Leaving the wheel, he moved uncertainly about the room, and presently settled down at a poker table, where several cowboys whom he had recently met were playing.

The game, however, dragged. Al became frankly bored, yawning over his cards. Besides one of the players, a professional, was to Al's practiced eye palpably dishonest in his manipulation of the pasteboards. Hands were running low and pots small for the present, but this fellow was undoubtedly laying plans for a killing in the near future.

"Guess I'll check out," said Al, and did so. He was a few dollars ahead, about what he had lost at the roulette wheel.

Again he moved leisurely about the room, feeling no particular interest in what was going on.

"Don't know what makes me so sleepy to-night," Al grumbled to himself. "Guess I'll go to bed."

Near the door a group of men attracted his attention. Al's former friend, the ragged desert rat, proved to be the center of interest. Evidently he had had fair luck in panhandling drinks, for the old man's weather-beaten, bristle-covered face was flushed, and his eyes sparkled with an unnatural brightness. He was talking—in his hoarse, whispered cackle.

"Gentlemen, I seen that rock pile—out there in the Stinking Springs country—and I says to myself, I says: 'Mebby this here's a moniment, to mark something important. Mebby somebody's piled up all these yer rocks for a purpose,' I says. 'Mebby it's a cache. We'll jest have a look-see,' I says.

"And so, gentlemen, I tore into that pile of rock, and when after awhile I got plumb down to the bottom, whatever do you reckon I find? A cache? No, it wasn't no cache. Gentlemen, hush! It was a skeleton, a laying on his back, a staring up at me out of them two black holes where his eyes uster be. Gentlemen, I'm here to state that it was shore a ghastly sight! And they was a mashed .45 bullet a sticking up through one of his ribs, where he'd been shot in the back by some wuthless polecat that was mebbe afraid to face him.

"They wa'n't nothing to tell who he was, gentlemen; only a few rags of clothes. But on the little finger of his left hand was a gold ring. I saved that there ring, gentlemen, thinking mebbe it'd bring me better luck than it brang the pore devil under the rock pile, but it didn't. No, by gum, because I missed locating the biggest strike this section ever see by less'n a year. I found it, but another guy beat me there."

He coughed experimentally, sending his glance keenly about the circle of silent listeners.

"Talking makes a feller's throat powerful dry," said he suggestively. "Who's buying?"

"Here you are!" and some one passed over a glass half full of liquor, asking curiously: "Ever find out who the dead man was?"

"No," said the desert rat, after an instant devoted to the rite of lubrication. "I never found that out, nor never tried to. What was the use. He was dead, wa'n't he? But I saved that ring for luck, and it never brought me no luck a-tall, even though it's fifteen years now I been carrying that little thin band of gold."

The prospector felt in a pocket; it was indeed marvelous that a pocket could be intact somewhere within the ruins which covered his nakedness.

"I'm broke, gentlemen all, and they ain't nobody ready to give me a grubstake. I got to have ready money, if it's only a measly little poke. I'm a going to sell this ring. Who'll buy it, gents? A ring off a dead man's finger. I forgot to tell one thing about it. Gentlemen, hush! Inside this here ring you can read, 'From J. H. to L. W.' What that stands for, gents, I don't reckon a body 'll ever know. How much'm I offered for this unlucky lucky ring, gentlemen. A gold ring right off'n the finger of a murdered man!"

"Ten dollars!" some one called in a tense voice. "I'll take a chance on your unlucky ring, old-timer," and Sam Pickett's face, deathly white, peered over the shoulders of the men between him and the owner of the ring. "Here you are."

Sam's fingers, shaking as with the palsy, extended a half eagle.

A foolish grin spread over the features of the desert rat.

"Wait," he chuckled. "Keep your coin for a minute. Ten, I'm offered. Who raises that. She's worth more. Who bids more'n ten?"

"*And twenty!*" Al Foster answered him grimly, as he shouldered a way through the crowd. "I've bought that ring, old man. Bidding's closed."

Al's coin slipped into the prospector's clawlike hand in exchange for the tiny circlet of gleaming gold. For an instant Al's eyes glittered coldly as his uncompromising glare held the frightened face of Sam Pickett under a spell. A moment later he disappeared.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BIRTH OF SUSPICION.

AL FOSTER, or—should we now see fit to give the young fellow his full name—Albert Foster Hollister, left Mort Degnan's saloon with a tumult of conflicting emotions seething riotously through his brain. That scene at the bar had crashed upon him with the startling effect of a sudden explosion.

A full moon hung in the sky above, a rich golden ball, shedding the benediction of its soft radiance down on the squalid little frontier town. But Easy Hollister's boy was blind to the glories of the night.

It was no news to him that his father had joined forces with one Sam Pickett on the prospecting trip which ended so tragically. As he grew older—and the seven-year-old boy matured fast—Al had vaguely wondered if Pickett might not somehow have cheated Hollister in connection with the famous Hidden Fortune mine, discovered so soon after the partnership was dissolved by death.

But the thing was all hazy and uncertain; absolutely nothing to go by; not a shred of evidence on which might be hung the faintest breath of suspicion.

None the less, when fate at last led Al into Pickett's territory, he had determined to play his hunch and to hide for a time at least his true identity by concealing part of his name. Al Foster did not in any way suggest Bert Hollister.

The cow-puncher was thus prepared to dislike Pickett at sight, and that first meeting with the mine owner, when Janice Day introduced them and when the two had nearly come to open warfare in her presence, did little to lessen the feeling in Al's heart. Now came this affair at Degnan's establishment.

Up to the present, Al had never, even in his own thoughts, ventured to question the accepted explanation of his father's death,

which, after all, was plausible enough. Therefore, the story told by that half intoxicated old desert rat struck him with all the more stunning force.

Al knew about that ring, his father's most prized possession. Jim Hollister had always worn it on his little finger; had often talked about it to his boy, telling of the wonderful mother he had lost. That Hollister could have disposed of the ring was unthinkable.

That fact seemed to clinch identification of the nameless skeleton as Jim Hollister. But the desert prospector had mentioned a .45 bullet plainly visible—proof that Hollister had not died in an accidental fall; that, quite the contrary, he had been foully murdered—shot down from behind. *By whom?*

Right here was one lie to be checked up against Sam Pickett's record. Also his report placed the location of Hollister's death a hundred miles distant from the country of the Stinking Springs, where the desert rat had found the skeleton under a heap of stones.

One more highly significant fact claimed attention. *The gold ledge—now the Hidden Fortune mine—was close to the Stinking Springs!*

Al reasoned it out this far, while he strode heedlessly on through the soft moonlight, not knowing or caring where his footsteps might lead. His fists clenched convulsively as the sinister knowledge loomed bigger and bigger before him. Sam Pickett was the murderer of his father.

"But I got to make sure of this," he muttered tensely. "It sure would be a pleasure to salivate a four flushing skunk like Sam Pickett, and that's the very reason why I got to be careful. I got to be almighty sure. I'm so damned mad at that polecat that first thing I'll be turning my flame thrower loose on him on general principles. That ain't right. Perhaps after all, he ain't the man that killed my dad. Mebbe that skeleton wasn't him, but some other man that got dad's ring after he was killed. God, I wish I knew!"

Al went over it again and again, striving desperately to be fair and impartial, and once more arrived at the same conclusion. Pickett must be guilty! If not, why had he tried to buy the ring when the desert rat offered it for sale? And why had he been so disturbed—frightened actually—when Al succeeded in gaining possession of the ring in spite of his own efforts?

"He sure was scared pink," the puncher mused grimly. "I dunno when I've seen a chap worse scared than he was. Looked like he was in a bad dream. Wonder if he knows who I am. Hope not."

Al's fingers closed on the tiny circlet of gold where it lay in his pocket. The fact that it had been his mother's meant little to him, for he had never known what it was to have a mother.

But he had very definite recollections of his dad, Jim Hollister, he of the kindly blue eyes, who promised such glorious things for the future, when he and his boy should some time own a ranch together. And Al could still remember that dreadful morning, fifteen years before, when they told him that dad was never coming back again.

A black rage now welled up in his heart at thought of Sam Pickett's treachery. The urge to draw his six-gun and start on a man hunt was well nigh irresistible.

In imagination he lived through the savage pleasure of glimpsing Pickett as he fell, half obscured by the belching smoke of the six-shooter. But Al managed to control the impulse.

"It ain't time yet," he told himself. "But it's a coming."

His thoughts went farther, to a new aspect of the situation.

"Dad would likely want Pickett salivated all right," he mused, "but there's the mine. Looks like Pickett killed him to get both their shares. Dad's belongs to me now, and I know he'd want for me to have it. Money would be a right smart help to carry on them plans I got in mind."

He thought wistfully of Janice Day, and the oft-remembered afternoon they had spent together, off in the limitless freedom of the great range. Those few hours had brought them very close together, it seemed. The picture of Janice, the glow of her fresh, young beauty, sent a delirious thrill sparkling like wine through his whole body.

"It would sure be nice," Al reasoned to himself, "if I had something to offer Janice besides a range rider's pay. Especially now that her dad's got into financial trouble with his ranch. It would be mighty nice if I could jump in and help him out; mebbe save the old Three Star brand from going plumb on the rocks. I'd like that a heap. They's nothing I'd rather do."

For a moment his thoughts raced recklessly on in this intriguing fashion. Then Al pulled himself together abruptly, grinning sheepishly at the man in the moon.

"Shucks, cowboy! Keep your head! You got your work cut out for you, and then some, if you're going to pull off even a half of all that stuff. Question is, where to begin?"

The old desert prospector came again to his mind. There were a dozen questions he wanted to ask—as to the exact time and circumstance of the gruesome find. Further interrogation might bring to light additional information of vital importance.

"I sure ought to have waited and talked more with him," Al told himself regretfully. "Perhaps he's still hanging around Degnan's joint—and mebby not too drunk to talk sense. Strikes me it might be a prudent hunch to give him the chance."

Swiftly Al retraced his steps to the Pay Dirt. He entered, glanced hastily around the establishment, where by now the crowd was beginning to thin out somewhat. Neither Pickett nor the aged prospector was to be seen. Al approached the bar.

"See that old desert rat lately, Joe?" he inquired of his acquaintance, the bartender. "The chap that worked me for a couple of shots of your choicest red eye awhile ago?"

"He ain't been here for some time," was the response. "Drifted out after he'd drunk up most of that twenty you give him for his ring. And I'll say he sure was lubricated. Got to the point where he was warbling love ballads. You missed a musical treat, Al. Queer ducks, these desert birds."

He made no comment regarding Sam Pickett's nervousness at the time of the ring transaction. Apparently it had escaped notice.

Al grunted a response and turned away, his plans uncertain. Of a sudden he was impressed with the necessity of locating the prospector, and without delay. He knew not why, yet it somehow came home to him that he had made a serious blunder in not following up the clue immediately.

It was late by now, the streets of Ore City practically deserted, save by occasional scattered pedestrians. Al strolled along under the glow of the full moon, his boot heels echoing hollowly on the makeshift plank walk.

He passed a narrow alley, little more than a crack between two dark stores, and something within the shadows attracted his attention — something vague, indefinite, shapeless. An unpleasant premonition seized Al; there was a sinister suggestiveness about that huddled mass on the ground, just beyond the range of bright moonlight.

A second later he was bending over the body of a man. It was dim and murky within that gloomy, cavern-like alleyway, but yet not too dim for Al, as he strained his eyes through the dark shadows, to recognize the body of the old desert prospector whom he had been seeking—dead, from a knife thrust in the back.

"Poor old devil!" thought Al, conscious more of pity for the unfortunate prospector than of regret as to how this killing might affect his own affairs.

"He sure talked a lot too loose and too much to-night. Sam Pickett's working fast. Didn't take him long to get this witness out of the way."

There was no room for doubt in his mind as to who had been the inspiration of the murder.

"Funny I ain't heard from him myself. But of course they's plenty time yet. I don't need to feel hurt because he's neglecting me."

Al glanced warily out from the alley, exposing part of his body in the moonlight. In prompt response came the sharp bark of a pistol across the street, from a dark area close to the corner of a building, and a bullet whiffed unpleasantly close to his head.

Al's gun fairly leaped from the holster, tied low on his thigh, as he took a snap shot at the telltale flash. A grunt of dis-

may, together with the clatter of a falling weapon, proved the accuracy of his fire.

"That's one!" thought young Mr. Foster in grim triumph. "But it ain't Samuel Pickett personal, not if I've sized that slippery gent up correct. Seems like he's the kind of guy that would prefer to hire his dirty work done by other parties, especially if there was any chance of a slip—like this here."

The brisk sound of running footsteps came to his ears—from several directions, as belated citizens of Ore City were attracted by the pistol shots. Al had no desire to be called on to explain matters just then, and accordingly slipped modestly away down the dark alley, which widened out back of the line of buildings, leaving the man he had shot as a committee of one to voice whatever explanations might be required—provided that unfortunate individual was still in condition to assume such responsible duties.

Al rather suspected that he might not be. The stranger's grunt on receiving the unexpected token from Al's gun had sounded decidedly—well—final, so to speak.

In one respect Al was frankly and wholeheartedly disgusted with himself, at the way he had carelessly violated all the elementary principles of sound military strategy.

"I certainly acted like a sap-head," he grumbled, "allowing that scum to come so near to salivating me. Nothing but bull luck on my part and rotten shooting on his pulled me through. Likely he'd been trailing me from Degnan's joint just now, waiting his chance for a pot shot, and me—I flopped along like a fool hen, never once looking back. I ought to have known Pickett would start some rough work. Right away, too. He ain't the kind to let grass grow long while making up his mind. He ain't through, either; not by a long shot. I got to watch out pretty close from now on. When he learns he's failed—"

Al's musings broke off, while a pleased smile appeared on his face. He stopped short in his tracks, almost overcome by the brilliant inspiration that had suddenly burst upon him.

Why cause Sam Pickett the mental distress of learning that his attempt at murder had been unsuccessful? Why not let him go on, laboring under the blissful delusion that it had succeeded? It would be easily possible to deceive him for a day or two; perhaps longer. Meanwhile Al need not be wholly idle.

During his brief sojourn in Ore City Al had already become well acquainted with the sheriff of that thriving little center, a man named Ed Bascomb.

Sheriff Bascomb, all in all, was a very decent scout, a casual associate of Sam Pickett's, but no cordial admirer or even well wisher. In fact, Al had heard him express his opinion of Pickett in rather unflattering terms. Sheriff Bascomb was one of those full-mouthed individuals, who, while not inclined to be wordy, still rejoice to call a spade by its proper name.

With Bascomb's aid—and Al felt confident that he could count on it—there would be a good chance of putting across a scheme already taking vague shape in his mind. Certain facts regarding Sam Pickett were not unknown to him.

By this time of night the sheriff would probably be in his rooms, unless drawn out on the street to investigate the recent shooting. This last was more probable. So in order to play safe Al resolved to wait a reasonable time, and he found a fairly comfortable place of concealment, where he allowed himself the enjoyment of several quiet cigarettes.

In due season Al decided to try his luck at Sheriff Bascomb's rooms. Everything was again quiet on the streets, whatever excitement developed from the pistol shots having died down. Shootings at night were not so rare as to cause excessive turmoil in Ore City.

Just the same, Al moved stealthily, taking pains to keep out of the bright moonlight. The success of his plans required that this visit to the sheriff remain a secret from every one.

He found Bascomb on the point of turning in; in fact, the office was half undressed when he answered Al's light tap at his door.

"Oh, it's you, eh, Foster!" Bascomb cried cordially. He liked Al tremendously, as did most of those who met that cheer-

ful youth. "Come in and give your feet a rest."

"Sh!" muttered Al dramatically, finger on his lips. "Pull down all the shades, sheriff; you're a-looking at a dead man!"

"You don't look very damned dead to me," the official grunted, unimpressed. Yet he closed a six inch gap at the bottom of a window shade. "But dead or not, come on in and shut the door."

Al obeyed.

"Thought I heard some shooting an hour or so ago," he remarked, taking possession of a chair. "What was it?" The sheriff yawned.

"Nothing much. Somebody plunked a greaser named Tony Perenzo through the left lung."

"Kill him?" Al inquired, interested.

"Deader'n a salt herring." The sheriff bent over, grunting, as he tugged at an obstinate boot.

"Tony Perenzo, eh! Tony's been a sort of mopper up for Sam Pickett, ain't he?" Al's face was bland and innocent as a baby's as he asked the question.

"You might say so," Bascomb agreed.

"Who shot him?"

"I dunno. But anyway, he did a good job. Figure the town's that much better off now than it was an hour ago. What's more, seems like the lad who put Tony to sleep ought to get a nice little reward in recognition of his services in the street cleaning department. I'd almost be willing to shell out myself."

"Pay me, then, sheriff," Al said coolly.

"Eh? What's that?" Bascomb demanded, letting a boot thump to the floor. His eyes were popping in astonishment. "Pay you?"

"Sure. Why not? That is, if they's anything substantial due for salivating Tony Perenzo. I'm the guy!"

"Well! I will be damned!" ejaculated the sheriff of Ore City piously.

"Only I forgot," Al hastened to add, "I'm dead, too, so they's no hurry about paying. You see, it's this way. Tony dropped me just before I turned loose on him. We each of us got the other, which sort of evens things up, don't it, sheriff?"

"What damned nonsense are you yapping about, Al Foster?" growled Sheriff Bascomb. "Talk sense for a spell, can't you?"

At this Al became serious for a moment.

"Here's the lay-out," said he. "Sam Pickett is the lad who really fired Tony's gun, and if it's the same to you I'd like him to think that Tony came through with his last assignment. I got an idea Pickett would be happier to believe that, and I sure want him to be happy—for a while, that is. Later on's something else again, and it's far from my notions to keep on spreading little beams of sunshine through his life. But couldn't you sort of pass the word around, on the quiet, taking pains that he got it, that you located my dead corpse not far from where Tony was lying—" Al broke off suddenly.

"You found that desert rat—stabbed?" he demanded.

The sheriff nodded.

"Been puzzled about him," he confessed. "Didn't see what connection he had with Tony."

"The connection was there," Al assured him. "Killing that poor old cuss was more of Pickett's work. Strikes me Sam Pickett's sure a citizen to be proud of. He's a valuable asset to your community, ain't he?"

Sheriff Bascomb accepted this generous tribute to an absent man with a fluently proficient outburst of profanity.

"Sam Pickett is a so-and-so!" he remarked, only the zealous official did not employ just that phraseology.

"Right!" Al grinned. "You and me, sheriff, sure regard Sam Pickett through the same pair of orbs. And now, if you ain't too sleepy, I'd admire to relate you a little story. Some of it's proved facts, and the rest of it is damned close to proved."

Bascomb lighted a cigar, tossed another at Al, lay down on his bed, and closed his eyes in luxurious contentment.

"Go ahead and spin your yarn, son," said he. "Shoot when ready."

So Al told his story—going back to the very beginning, fifteen years or more in the past—and in less than two minutes the sheriff was keenly alert, sitting up, his eyes wide open. Al produced a yellowed, wrin-

kled piece of paper, handing it over to Bascomb.

"There's the agreement between dad and Pickett," he explained. "They were to share fifty-fifty on whatever they found that trip. Dad always wanted everything of that sort down in black and white. He put this in a safe place with some other papers before he and Pickett hit the trail—the trail from which dad never came back. I found it quite a spell after his death."

Al went on, telling all he knew—and suspected—right down to the murder of the desert rat and the attempt on his own life. "Pickett is badly scared," he concluded. "For a long time now he's probably been satisfied that the ugly business was over for keeps, safe out of the way; he figured that it would never crop up to plague him—and then, all of a sudden, bang! here it is, big as life, threatening to bust wide open. And he can see his swift finish if it does. His only hope it to get rid of the two parties that might put things together and puzzle out the truth. One of 'em he's got already—"

"And you want him to believe he got the other," the sheriff interrupted.

"Correct."

"But what good will it do you? I ain't saying we couldn't pull the proposition off as you've stated it; but I don't see the idea."

"I don't know—only I've got a hunch, a sort of scheme in my head. The thing ain't more'n half worked out yet."

"Tell me when you get her straightened out," the sheriff suggested. There was a moment of silence, then the sheriff went on, musing out loud.

"It's plain as daylight, son, that Sam Pickett killed your dad and got away with your dad's share of that gold strike one of 'em made. Might have been your dad found it. Who can tell? This is one of those things you *know*, but couldn't prove in a million years.

"Your best bet is gone—with the killing of that prospector—and we'd have a horrible job hanging that on Sam Pickett. With the old rat as a witness we might work up a case, though I ain't so very sure even of that much. Without him you're ditched.

"Now, if you bust out and kill Sam Pickett you ain't got a chance to secure the property—not a solitary legal claim to it. Not to mention being in a peck of trouble for the killing. Speaking personal, as a private citizen, I'd rejoice to see you fan the everlasting daylights out of that skunk with your six-gun; I'd be glad to pay good money for a reserved seat, where I could witness the festivities and cheer your pistol practice. That's spoken as a private citizen, son, you understand.

"Now, as a public officer, I'm urging you not to go gunning for Pickett, because if you do I know you'll get him. And if you get him it 'll be my painful duty to arrest you for murder. Ain't that so?"

"I reckon it is, sheriff," Al agreed.

"They's only one way I can see for you to establish a claim to a quarter interest in the Hidden Fortune Mine and a half of all the profits Sam has taken out of it to date," Bascomb went on. "That's for Sam Pickett to acknowledge you're entitled to it. Which is a lot for him to admit, because it also means confessing that he shot your dad down like a dog. Do you think they's much chance of Sam's sticking his neck into a hangman's rope by coming out in public with a statement like that?"

"See here, sheriff," Al demanded. "Will you back up any play I make? Any play that's strictly legal, I mean, providing I agree not to start gunning for Pickett?"

"Hell, yes!" Bascomb cried emphatically. "I'll back you to the finish. I'd sure love to see Sam Pickett get his—and I want to see you twist that Hidden Fortune property out of his slimy grip."

"Thanks!" was Al's brief comment. "I figured you'd say that." Then: "What I've been turning over in my mind, sheriff, is something along this general line—"

CHAPTER VII.

PLOTS AND PLANS.

SAM PICKETT was in a decidedly mellow mood as he rode his horse out of Ore City that afternoon, headed for the Three Star Ranch—and Janice Day. Sam felt that things were at last beginning

to break for him, all the more welcome a condition because it followed a period of uncertainty and even black fear.

The presence of that wandering cowpuncher named Al Foster had bothered Pickett more than he liked to admit, even to himself. It seemed that somewhere, some time in the past, he had met Al Foster. Or else there was a vague suggestion, a sort of resemblance, between the cowboy and some other person whom he had known.

For a time Sam had been unable to place this resemblance. Then, like a blow in the face, it came to him. The man was Easy Hollister, the partner he had murdered, whose dying curse still haunted him. This realization had first come that evening in Degnan's gambling house, when he and Mort stepped from the office to line up candidates for a poker game.

Yet it seemed hardly possible that Al Foster could be Hollister's son, even though the age of the two must be about the same. Foster's resemblance to Easy was doubtless merely a chance likeness—a queer trick of fate. If this puncher were Easy's boy, now grown to manhood, why did he not go by his father's name?

So Sam Pickett argued, and gradually succeeded in working himself out of the first spasm of fear. Pickett was superstitious by nature, an ignorant man, in spite of the position his wealth gave him.

The natural distrust and dislike he felt for Foster, because the cowboy's face brought back unpleasant recollections, was further heightened by the young fellow's defiance when Sam had warned him to get out of the country, and later still more by that ride he took with Janice. Sam Pickett had come to look upon Stormy Day's pretty daughter as destined to be his own property in the not far distant future.

Just when Sam was beginning to breathe a little more easily, convinced that there was no connection between Al Foster and that dark blot in his memory, came the scene of the previous night at Degnan's saloon. Sam had heard the old prospector rambling on, and paused to listen in idle curiosity; he had just entered, and was unaware that Al Foster was in the room.

Then Pickett was held in the grip of stark terror when he perceived, as the desert rat told his story, that this fellow had actually stumbled on the remains of Easy Hollister; that he had in his possession the very ring Hollister had worn. Still more damaging, that his story was proof that Hollister had been murdered.

Pickett cursed himself inwardly for not removing the ring when he hastily covered the body with rocks. He now realized that he must secure this evidence at any cost; must destroy it immediately. Otherwise, the shadow of terror would never leave him.

At once, to his dismay, a second bidder for the fatal ring appeared from nowhere—Al Foster again, that same mysterious cowboy whose chance likeness to the murdered man had been so disturbing to Pickett's peace of mind.

Sam dared not attract further attention to himself by more bidding against Al. He read the truth in the cold fury of the glance Foster bestowed on him as he triumphantly pocketed the ring.

Al *was* Hollister's son, come at last as an instrument of vengeance to fulfill the dead man's curse. How much did he know or suspect? Too much, clearly.

Pickett's fear gradually gave way to cool planning. These two, the cowboy and the prospector, must never meet again; and they must be put out of the way before further damage could be done. Sam plotted swiftly.

Five minutes after he left the saloon the half drunk prospector was stabbed to death by Tony Perenzo, Sam's private agent. Al was temporarily lost sight of, but his trail was again picked up when he returned a second time to Degnan's place in search of the prospector. Later on that night Pickett learned to his bitter disappointment that Tony had bungled in the attempt to assassinate Foster; that he had fallen instead of his victim.

But this disappointment vanished the next morning, when it came to Sam's ears on the authority of Sheriff Bascomb that Al's dead body had been found not far from where Tony met his death. The two had fought a pistol duel, both dying.

"Luck has certainly turned!" Sam gloat-

ed. "I ought to be grateful to that fool cowboy for getting Tony out of the way. That was the only part left to bother me. With him gone, everything's sure serene and happy."

All of which explains why Sam Pickett felt so mellow toward the world at large as he sent his mount loping on toward the Three Star Ranch that afternoon.

He found Janice, dressed in riding costume, sitting on the front steps of her home. Her greeting to Sam was friendly enough, and a warm glow burned about the spot where the enamored gentleman fondly believed his heart to be located.

"You're looking fine, Janice," he observed. "Not but what you always do, for that matter. Let's ride out for awhile. Too nice a day to be wasted."

She assented, and Sam went with her to the stables, where he quickly saddled the girl's favorite horse. Soon they were cantering out across the grassland, the Three Star buildings left behind. Janice loved to ride, and now a faint flush of wholesome color suffused her cheeks.

Pickett eyed her covertly, thinking that she had never been so beautiful. By an effort he stifled a mad desire to seize her in his arms, to crush her slim young body close to his.

"I didn't see your dad at the ranch," he presently remarked. "How is he, Janice?"

The happy look faded; in an instant her face changed. Janice now appeared troubled, almost careworn.

"I'm frightened to death about him," she confessed, her glance averted. "The ceaseless worry is making him sick. It even seems to be affecting his mind."

She made no mention of her father's drinking, though Sam knew it was in her thoughts. The time seemed propitious to him.

"I've noticed it myself," he told the girl. "As you say, it's worry over money matters that is back of it. He's really well enough."

The horses slowed down to a walk, neither rider urging greater speed.

"He loves the old ranch," she whispered. "He's going to lose it, too, soon. That will kill him, if the mere thought doesn't drive him mad first." She shuddered, sighing: "Poor dad!"

Pickett bent toward her.

"He doesn't need to lose the Three Star, you know, Janice. It's not yet too late to save it—and him."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I love you, Janice, desperately. Will you marry me?"

Her eyes again turned away, clouded.

"You ought not to take advantage of my trouble, Sam. I don't love you, and I never could love you. There would be no happiness for either of us in such a marriage. Why, it would be wicked."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Janice. Love comes easy sometimes, and I ain't worrying because you don't love me yet. Guess you could learn how in time. I ain't such a bad fellow at heart."

"I didn't say you were," she cried quickly. "It's just that I—oh, can't you see how it is, Sam?"

"'Fraid I can't, Janice. But why not look at it from your dad's side for a spell? Think what it would mean to him. With me to back him all his troubles would be gone—like a puff of cigarette smoke on a windy day. It would mean the saving of his Three Star Ranch, the place he loves so much. It would save him—from death, or worse."

Janice remained silent for an instant, while the two horses plodded slowly along.

"You mean you want me to marry you for dad's sake?" she presently said. "Knowing that I don't love you, and might in time even learn to hate you? You want me on those terms, Sam?"

"Why, yes," he assented frankly. "You see, I think so much of you, Janice, that I'd willingly take you on any terms you might state."

Again the girl was silent, gazing soberly off across the range. Sam studied her.

"By the way, you remember that cowpuncher you introduced me to? The one that helped you out when you got in trouble with your horse the other day?"

She nodded, a faint glow of interest showing in her eyes. Sam did not miss it.

"What about him?"

"He ran into tough luck. Got in a shoot-

ing scrape at Ore City with a fellow last night—over a woman, they were saying in town. Well, be that as it may, both of 'em were killed."

"Oh!" The word came in a sudden gasp, and the light died in her eyes.

Sam was watching, and he saw.

"Bull's-eye!" he thought in triumph. "She was beginning to like that cuss. I didn't get him out of the way any too soon. Guess I've got a good chance of forcing things through, the way the land lays now."

He said nothing for awhile, shrewdly allowing Janice opportunity to collect her thoughts following the tragic news he had told her. At length he spoke again.

"I've been mighty sorry about your dad, Janice. I'd heard he was having a bad run of luck, but I never dreamed how bad it was. When I found out I went right to him and tried to let him have some money."

Janice Day's clear eyes dwelt questioningly on his.

"Why did you do that, Sam?"

"Because I wanted to help him—and you. They wasn't any strings on the offer, Janice."

He saw a denial of this in her face.

"I mean that. I was just trying to show my good will to the two of you. But he wouldn't listen to me," Sam added regretfully. "Your dad's mighty proud. But I know this much: if I was his son-in-law, married to you, he'd be willing to take help. Why not, when it's all in the family? Another thing, Janice. He's hoping you'll marry me—because that 'll fix things so both of you are taken care of."

"Dad said that!" she cried. "Said he hoped I'd marry you!"

Sam realized that he must choose his words with care.

"Well, if he didn't say it in so many words, he did say just about the same thing. It was easy to see what he had in mind. Your dad's getting old, Janice, and he's bothered over the thought of what might happen to you if he should die. If things were—different—I figure he's good for a long time yet. It's in your power to save him, Janice—to add years to his life—to make him happy again. Do you care enough about him to do that, Janice? If so, all you got to do is say the word."

Janice felt her will power wavering under the spell of Pickett's urging. What he said was all doubtless true enough—at least he made it seem terribly clear. Yet—to marry him—to link herself for a lifetime to this man with the close-set, scheming eyes! It was horrible.

Sam Pickett might be at heart, as he modestly asserted, not a bad sort of fellow. But the intuitive reasoning ability of her sex told the girl that something was wrong with him. What that something was made no difference.

Her eyes rested on the distant horizon, unseeing, and like a mirage there materialized before her a picture of Al Foster, the cool, self-confident, laughing cow-puncher. Why couldn't it have been Al instead of Sam Pickett? she asked herself wretchedly. But Al was dead, killed in a sordid gun fight on the streets of a sordid town. She mustn't think longer of him, of what might have been. All that was past—a page torn from her life and burned up.

She was dimly conscious that Sam leaned toward her; she felt his arm rest caressingly on hers. Involuntarily Janice shuddered at the touch, striving to draw away, as if the contact with Sam was as something unclean.

"What do you say?" he whispered. "What's the answer?"

In silent misery she closed her eyes, turning from him. For a few seconds her resolution wavered; she even meditated sudden flight, out across the rolling range country. But that lasted a brief time only. When next she faced Pickett it was with steady nerves and a strong spirit. For the sake of her beloved father Janice was prepared to make this great sacrifice—and no one, least of all her father, would ever know how vast a sacrifice it was.

"I'll marry you, Sam," she said quietly, "on the conditions you have offered—the financial help to dad that will put him on his feet again."

He beamed fatuously upon her in the boundlessness of his delight; Janice silenced his fervid protestations with a sharp gesture of her hand.

"One minute, please, Sam. Let's have this business straight between us, and thoroughly understood. Don't expect any sentiment from me. For dad's sake, I'm selling you the most precious thing I own, just like those poor painted creatures in the resorts at Ore City. Probably I'm no better than they are. Like them, I want my pay, and I'll take it in advance, please, so there'll be no question about my getting it."

"But you mustn't act this way, Janice!" Sam Pickett gasped. Even his thick skin had been punctured. "You make me out a regular villain."

"I'm sorry, Sam," and Janice managed a feeble smile. "You're not to blame; perhaps I should even be grateful to you. I feel caught in the web of circumstances over which I have no control, helpless, like a wretched fly in the web of a spider. I don't mean that you're the spider, Sam. What I mean is that you're only the instrument of fate.

"Coming back to what I started to say a minute ago, I'll marry you when you have deposited thirty-five thousand dollars to my credit in the bank at Black Eagle. Am I worth that much, Sam?"

"You don't put a high enough price on yourself, Janice," said Pickett grimly. "You could have got more if you asked for it."

"I didn't want to cheat you," she cried, with affected levity. Then suddenly "Let's go home, Sam. I don't want to ride any more."

"But I wasn't counting on starting back so quick," he protested, adding to himself, "She was willing to sit and talk to that Foster fellow. Well, anyway, she won't be talking to him any more."

Janice, however, was obdurate, and grumblingly Sam yielded.

Relations were just a trifle strained during the homeward ride. As Janice had quite frankly said, there would be no sentimental nonsense about their arrangement; Sam had to make the best of it.

"But I'll make her toe the mark once we're married," he told himself savagely. "If she figures on using me for a door-mat to wipe her pretty little feet on, she's mistaken."

Janice did not invite her disgruntled suitor in when they arrived at the ranch house, nor did he expect any such invitation. With a curt farewell Sam faced his pony toward Ore City, and savagely drove in the spurs.

He had to take his rage out on some living thing, and as a result was very nearly bucked into oblivion. But by the time he reached town Sam was in good humor again; especially so after he had enjoyed an unusually good meal at Curley Smith's restaurant. Mort Degnan came in as Sam finished.

"Congratulate me, Mort!" Pickett cried jovially.

"What's happened, Sam?" and Degnan sat down at the table. "They opened up a new vein of ore over at the Hidden Fortune?"

"Nope!" Sam laughed. "Not's I've heard lately. But I may be needing something like that before I get through. I'm going to get married, Mort."

"Well, well! And who's the fortunate young lady?"

"Janice Day."

Mort Degnan lifted his eyebrows in comprehension.

"Oh—I see. Those notes, eh? Thought there was something in the air when you bought them. They were a club to knock the girl into your arms, eh?"

"No!" Pickett chuckled. "You're wrong, Mort. Partly wrong, I mean. That was the original scheme, but I didn't have to use 'em at all. Things went a lot smoother than I figured they would. I didn't have to show all my hand."

"Speaking of showing hands reminds me," said Degnan. "Bascomb was looking for you. He's staging one of his poker parties to-night with the clear blue sky as the limit. Said he thought you might like to get in on it, and asked me to pass the word on in case I saw you."

"Who's going to be there?" Pickett inquired, reaching for a toothpick.

"He didn't say, but I just saw the sheriff out on the street. He was standing in front of Dutch Looie's. Why don't you drift over that way and get all the details?"

"Guess I will. A live poker game listens

good to me, and I guess Bascomb can be counted on to supply action in that direction. It's what I want right now "

CHAPTER VIII.

SHERIFF BASCOMB ENTERTAINS.

ED BASCOMB, genial sheriff of Ore City, thoughtfully surveyed the scene, while awaiting the arrival of his expected guests. Bascomb was a host *par excellence,* and like any good host the worthy official was anxious that the scheduled event should go off strictly according to the dictates of accepted social usage.

The card table, large enough to accommodate six players without crowding, was in readiness, smooth with its cover of green billiard cloth. On it was a plentiful supply of poker chips, together with several packages of new cards, the seals yet unbroken.

Another table a little to one side bore a choice collection of bottled goods, the quality of which was attested by well-known labels. Glasses, and siphons of mineral water, were also at hand.

A box of cigars, far better than those usually encountered in the range country, lay open in silent invitation. Matches and ash receivers were located at stragetic points. Everything seemed provided for.

The sheriff glanced here and there about the room, nodding to himself, as a person who checks off sundry items in his mind.

Ed Bascomb's poker parties were something of an institution in Ore City. One never casually happened in at Ed's rooms on the night of such an affair. One sometimes had the good fortune to be invited, provided the sheriff liked him personally and judged him worthy of the honor. For, make no mistake about it, to receive an invitation was to be signally honored.

The game, usually for high stakes, was strictly a gentleman's game. One was expected to win—or lose—like a gentleman, and in point of fact, one always did.

The games were commonly staged in what served Bascomb as living room. Next to this, opening off it, lay his sleeping chamber, which had no connection with the outside save by windows. The sheriff's quarters were on the second floor of a building located just off the town's principal street. The ground floor was occupied by a feed and grain establishment.

Sam Pickett had never been bidden within the sacred circle—not until this particular evening, that is. Often had he angled for a chance, but without success, and at last he had come to the rather bitter conclusion that Sheriff Bascomb and his cronies regarded him, so to speak, as *persona non grata,* though Sam did not express it in just those words.

This was a hard pill, for Pickett considered himself as good as the next man—if not a little better—and he clearly loved a game of poker. Therefore, while he had received the invitation, relayed along by Mort Degnan, with assumed indifference, Sam was actually vastly pleased.

It seemed a good omen, coming immediately after the lucky break in that matter of Al Foster and the additional success he had gained in the courtship of Janice Day.

The guests assembled promptly. First to arrive was Bob Graham, a mining man of considerable means; after him Jack and Harry Davis, brothers, both in the cattle business. Fred Shackleton, lawyer by profession, and also interested in cattle, and Sam Pickettt arrived almost together.

"Everybody's here, gentlemen," said Bascomb genially. "I reckon we all know each other, though we ain't all met under these same conditions before. First thing's a drink. Help yourself according to your tastes," and he hospitably waved toward the bottle laden table. "Cigars are waiting for you, too."

There was a certain amount of good-natured chaffing as the players took seats at the hosts's direction. Much of it had to do with a previous game, where, it seemed, the Davis brothers had cleaned up handsomely.

There was mention of revenge; also the fact that to-night was another night; and so on. Sam Pickett joined heartily in the badinage, well pleased that the others accepted his presence as a matter of course. They were good fellows, he thought.

The game began. Bob Graham won the

cut for deal, and briskly shuffled a new deck.

"Let's go, fellows!" he cried. "And God help the hindmost."

Sam Pickett, at left of the dealer, caught three kings on his first hand, and passed, risking that one of the others would open and so give him a chance to boost the kitty. Jack Davis and Shackleton passed in turn, and then Harry Davis opened the pot for twenty dollars.

"She's busted!" said he.

"It'll cost you twenty more," spoke up the sheriff, who sat at Harry's left.

"On what?" Davis grumbled testily, but the sheriff merely grinned, shoving forward the necessary chips.

Bob Graham, the dealer, threw down his cards, while the rest looked expectantly at Sam, whose face was expressionless.

"Sixty more, just to make it an even hundred," said Pickett. Harry and Bascomb saw the raise, no one else staying.

"Cards?" asked the dealer through the haze of his up-tilted cigar.

Sam Pickett hesitated the merest fraction of a second. We have already spoken of him as superstitious, and he carried his superstitions into poker, firmly believing that if he won the first pot in a game he would be successful throughout the entire evening.

The winning of the first pot was almost a fetish with him. Also, he regarded deuces as lucky cards. In this case Sam's hand was three kings, a ten, and a deuce.

The normal draw was to full strength—two cards, because there was a chance one of his opponents—Bascomb had already raised once—held a pat hand, against which the three kings, unimproved, would be worthless. Sam, however, played on his lucky hunch, discarding the ten.

"One," said he. It proved to be the deuce of hearts. He buried it among the other four cards without the quiver of an eyelash.

"Nothing can stop me," was his exultant thought. "Lucky in war, love, cards, and everything. I'll show these guys a few fine pointers in poker."

Davis drew two. Bascomb stood pat, raising Harry's ten dollar bet by fifty. This Sam Pickett raised again, not too heavily—a sort of come along raise. He expected Bascomb to come back at him strong. Davis dropped.

"You're too husky for me, Sam," the sheriff sighed regretfully, and laid down a heart flush, ace high. "And they ain't worth a damn," he grumbled, "against kings full." For Sam had shown his cards, yielding to the temptation to gloat a little over what he had done.

"How's that for luck?" he exclaimed. "Held the three kings, kept a deuce for luck, and caught another deuce."

"Very pretty," said Shackleton briefly. "Your deal."

The game went on with the ups and downs characteristic of a poker session. For an hour Sam Pickett won steadily, forcing his luck with relentless determination.

Then the tide changed—and changed with a vengeance. Sam found himself in that most aggravating situation for the confirmed poker player; he held cards—good ones, time after time—but yet his good hands were invariably just topped by some other member of the group.

Whatever he did went sour. He bluffed at the wrong time and laid down his hand when a good stiff bluff would surely have worked. Ordinarily an expert at the great American game, Sam played like a rank amateur, yet without the proverbial luck of the beginner.

All this bothered him, and he began plunging, rashly overplaying his hands, with the natural result that he lost twice as fast.

The mere loss of money, considerable though it was, caused Pickett not the slightest distress. He could have dropped ten or twenty thousand, and not seriously have missed it. But what did worry him was that his pet superstition, based on winning the opening pot, was not coming through according to schedule.

He took this as a bad omen for other matters, and became nervous—increasingly so—yet his fellow gamblers seemed not to notice it.

Occasional recesses were called for, especially after some unusually big hand, when

the entire party adjourned to the impromptu bar for a round of drinks. This drinking was moderate enough, with the exception of Pickett, who alone of the party showed any effect of the whisky he had taken.

Sam's face was flushed and moist with perspiration. His collar was choking tight, and he loosened it. Then with a mumbled apology he removed both collar and tie. Frequently he passed his fingers around inside the neckband of his shirt and over his damp forehead.

At length, by a queer freak of chance, there fell to Sam the identical combination of cards that he had held on the first hand of the evening—three kings, a ten, and a deuce. Again he passed, waiting to raise some one else's opening, but the others also passed, and the deal moved on. Sam's three kings were wasted, and his spirits sank to still lower levels. Everything went against him, he thought resentfully.

Sam sat facing the sheriff's bedroom, feebly illuminated by the moonbeams which slanted in through the two windows—and a little light from the card table. Harry Davis sat opposite Sam, his back to the door connecting the rooms.

Graham, at Pickett's right, had opened a pot for a nominal sum, all the players staying. Bascomb, the dealer, picked up the deck.

"Cards?" he asked of Graham, who took one.

"How many, Sam?" hardly looking toward Pickett, and when there was no reply the sheriff repeated his demand.

"How many you taking?"

Sam's response was a horrid, unearthly cackle, and then the other players all looked at him. Pickett's face was deathly white, his eyes glassy and bulging from their sockets; his lower jaw sagged open. He was staring fixedly, in horrified fascination, past Harry Davis's shoulder into the shadows of the room beyond.

"What's the matter, man?" Graham exclaimed in consternation.

Sam Pickett swayed limply in his chair. "I—saw—something—in the other room," he mumbled, passing his tongue over his dry lips.

"Good Lord!" Shackleton cried impatiently. "What nonsense! You've been drinking too much. Ought to know better than to pour whisky down like that. Waste of good liquor. You didn't see anything."

But Pickett only shook his head, his face chalky white with the unwholesome pallor of a corpse.

"Go in the other room, Harry," Shackleton went on. "Just to make Sam sure there's nothing there. This is the damnedest thing I ever heard of. Looks as if he'd seen a ghost."

Pickett's body quivered at the last word.

Davis left his chair. They heard him rummaging about in Bascomb's bedroom, whistling cheerfully.

"Room seems to be empty," he said, and came back toward his seat, grinning reassuringly at Pickett. "Nothing to get stirred up about, Sam. Guess your imagination's working overtime. Take another drink to brace you up."

But hardly had Davis stepped through the door than Sam Pickett saw, exactly where Jack had been only a second before, a dreadful apparition materialize from nowhere. There could be no doubt about it this time, though Sam had not doubted before.

There, standing between the two rooms, was his former partner, Easy Hollister, the man whom he had murdered, and whose son he had just had murdered, as Sam had seen him in his dreams scores of times.

Easy's faded blue flannel shirt and his pants hung in tatters, as if rotted by long exposure to the elements. One touch, it seemed, and they must have crumbled into dust. The coarse miner's boots were cracked and covered with green mold. Tangled wisps of hair hung horribly down under the greasy old felt hat.

But far more frightful than all this was the face of this dreadful figure; it flickered and glowed with a sickly yellow flame, and from the hideous death's head came the glare of two terrible eyes. Sam shrunk, cowering pitifully before that gaze; he could feel it boring into him with a remorseless, dread malignity.

"Look! *Look!* There it is!" he cried, pointing.

The poker players, one and all, glanced curiously from Sam to the doorway at which he pointed, and back again. They questioned each other, silently, with their looks.

Shackleton nodded at Sheriff Bascomb, tapping his skull significantly. Sam took in the gesture through fear-dilated eyes. Was it possible that he alone could see this horrid specter, come back, as it had promised, from the other world? They could not see it, otherwise their faces must reflect some of the horror he himself felt.

With a movement indescribably stealthy, noiseless, effortless, the ghastly apparition came forward toward Sam Pickett, claw-like talons extended out to seize him. What few shreds of self-control the wretched man still possessed promptly vanished. He screamed again in the utter extremity of his terror.

"No! No! Don't, Easy! Not that! Don't touch me! *Don't touch me!*" and the scream rose to a shrill, unearthly falsetto that rang through the room.

Sam Pickett fell on his knees, groaning, clutching desperately at Bascomb's hands. "Don't let that thing come near me!" he groaned.

"What thing?" Bascomb asked soothingly. "Who is it, Sam?"

"Easy Hollister. He was my partner. I killed him to get his share of the mine. He's come to get me, like he said he would. Oh-h-h-h! Keep away, Easy. Keep away, I tell you!" and Sam Pickett crouched, whimpering, at Bascomb's feet.

"I guess we've heard enough. How about it?" said the sheriff grimly.

The other men nodded, no pity in their stern glances for the shrinking, babbling wreck that groveled on the floor.

"I didn't think the scheme would work," Shackleton remarked. "It wouldn't have, with a real man, but of course Pickett isn't a man. He's made of jelly and sawdust, or some similar combination."

There sounded two sharp clicks—and a pair of glittering handcuffs snapped shut on the wrists of Sam Pickett, who did not yet quite fully understand the magnitude of the misfortune which had befallen him.

"You're some actor, boy," the sheriff chuckled to Al Foster. "And your make-up's a lu-lu. That phosphorus on your face would give 'most anybody the creeps. I was blamed near scared myself, and I guess the rest was—even if we did expect it."

"You gentlemen weren't so bad yourselves," Al grinned. "I was afraid it would be hard to look at me, rigged up like this, and not show in your faces that I was really there. Say, it worked like a charm, didn't it?"

"Best poker session I ever staged," remarked Sheriff Bascomb contentedly.

CHAPTER IX.

THE END—AND A BEGINNING.

ON the morning after the poker party Al Foster discussed his affairs at some length with Shackleton and Sheriff Bascomb, both of whom were hugely delighted with the outcome of their plot. Shackleton readily consented to act as Al's legal representative, assuring him that no difficulty would be encountered in successfully pressing a claim against Pickett's estate.

"It's a clear case of fraud," said he confidently, "with the added complication of a cold-blooded, despicable murder. Pickett has confessed his guilt on each count in the presence of witnesses. Of course he will deny the confession—or rather declare that it was not voluntary—but precious little good will it do him. There's nothing a Western jury will convict on sooner than this sort of crime. Pickett will hang as sure as the Lord made green apples. I never did like the fellow."

"That's a sight better'n if you went gunning for him, son," the sheriff put in, his hand resting on the young man's shoulder in friendly fashion. "I'd hate to see you branch out in the gun-slinging business, when it ain't really called for. And so far as genuine punishment goes, I'll guarantee Sam Pickett 'll suffer a lot more between now and the time we hang him than if you snuffed his worthless life out with a single slug of lead."

"Probably you're right, as usual, sher-

iff," Al agreed, "though I've been sort of cherishing the idea of taking one good crack at him one of these days."

"I know I'm right. By the way, I dunno's this will interest you a pile, but seems Sam was going to get married, the foxy son-of-a-gun. Stormy Day's daughter. Likely they's some funny didoes back of it all, because Janice Day don't impress me as the sort of girl that would tie up to such rotten timber. Anyway, Sam was swelling around town last night, announcing the near approach of his nuptials."

"I shouldn't wonder but what Mr. Pickett might have been mistaken," Al said gravely, though his blue eyes danced. "Just like he was in some other matters. It's been a weakness of Sam Pickett's to go off now and then premature."

"No doubt about it at all," the sheriff assented, with a sober wink. "I've noticed it myself. That's a dawgoned dangerous habit for a man of a six-gun. Just the same, somebody ought to marry that girl. Folks here and there may regard her as a mite high-toned, mebby, but at heart Janice's as good as she is good-looking. And that's saying quite a lot. Why don't you marry her yourself, Al?"

"Your advice is sure of grade A quality, sheriff," Al grinned derisively, "but you're a pile too late. Why, it's ten days or so since I made up my mind to do that very little thing you mention. I was sure about it the first time I laid eyes on Janice. She don't know it yet, mebby, but she will. Give me time."

The face of Sheriff Bascomb beamed in delight. He warmly seized Al by the hand. "Go to it, cowboy! It's great to be young. If I wasn't so old I might give you a run for the money. As it is—oh, well! And one thing more, son—if Janice won't listen to reason you send her to me. I'll talk to her like a Dutch uncle. I'll talk a lot of sense into that pretty head of hers."

"I don't think that 'll be necessary, sheriff," said Al dryly. "I'm pretty good at talking myself."

Young Mr. Foster's heart was singing a merry little tune that afternoon as he sent his Rusty horse over the same trail Sam Pickett had traveled twenty-four hours previous—the trail of the Three Star Ranch and Janice Day.

"Come on, Rusty," he said. "Shake your legs, cayuse. This ain't a funeral we're traveling in."

"Oh, the prairie dogs are yapping,
And the plover's on the wind.
The little calves are blatting.
It's a first class sign of spring.
The cottonwood's a-budding;
The range is turning green.
It's the pretty things of nature
That make life a pleasant dream."

Janice, adorable as always, trim and graceful in her riding clothes, came to the door in answer to his knock. She turned deathly pale at sight of him, almost falling. She steadied herself by holding fast to the knob.

"Why—why—" Janice stammered, wide-eyed. "I thought you were dead!"

"Who—me?" Al drawled cheerfully. "Gosh, no! That was only one more of Sam Pickett's premature notions. He's dawgoned careless some ways, that guy."

"I'm glad you weren't shot, Mr. Foster," she said demurely. Al's droll greeting had brought her a swift recovery from the unexpected shock of his arrival.

"So'm I. But who in heck's this here Mr. Foster?" he queried plaintively. "I thought I told you my name was Al. They was a mistake about that shooting business. The other guy was on the receiving end, 'stead of me. Your friend Sam Pickett got his facts twisted, sort of. You went riding with him yesterday, I hear," and Al's blue eyes danced impudently.

"What if I did?" Janice retorted defiantly. "Do you object?"

"Sure, I object," he informed her coolly. "I object a whole lot. But seems like I ought to stand it if you can; maybe you ain't so fussy. What I been thinking of is this: if Sam had his chance yesterday, it ought to be my turn to-day. How about it? Ain't that reasonable?"

Janice hesitated, in sudden embarrassment. She had not heard of the latest developments at Ore City, and so was ignorant that her estimable bridegroom-to-be was languishing in jail.

"You've got to marry him," she kept whispering to herself. Even if he had lied to her about Al's death, for it seemed highly improbable that he had been merely mistaken, the facts were not altered. The only thing she could do now was to dismiss Al and see him no more.

But Janice, with the best intentions in the world, surely chose a queer mode of dismissal. It was to smile bewitchingly on Al, shutting her eyes to the future with a sort of instinctive bravado. The future, black and forbidding, had to come, of course. Yet now she would take what pleasure she could in the present.

"I'd love to go riding—with you—Al," she said softly.

"Which makes it unanimous," cried Al.

It had rained a few days before, and tiny blossoms studded the ground under their horses' hoofs as the two rode forth from the Three Star buildings. Janice was quiet, her gaze, fixed on the distant mountain peaks, sober and thoughtful. Conversation languished. It was Al who first broke the silence.

"You know Sheriff Bascomb, over at Ore City, don't you, Miss Janice?"

She nodded.

"Pretty good old skate, the sheriff, take him as he comes. Don't you think so?"

"I suppose he makes a good enough town marshal," Janice replied, wondering where this might lead. It was a peculiar sort of subject that Al had selected, she thought.

"He gave me a regular earful of sound advice this morning," Al rambled chattily on, "though I sure didn't need it, being's I had the same idea in mind myself. It was funny, both of us being hit the same way."

He waited, and finally Janice just had to answer.

"What was the advice the sheriff gave you?"

"He was saying as how I ought to get married. I reckon he figured I needed toning down, or something."

Janice flashed a startled glance at him, but Al's poker face told her nothing. She looked away.

"You think that was good advice?" he insisted.

"Why—I—guess so," she faltered, hoping that he couldn't hear the alarmingly loud thumping of her heart.

"Now, that's splendid," Al went on in deep contentment. "Makes three of us looking at it in the same way."

Something seemed to go snap—just like that—deep down inside Janice Day; and then, as if the floodgates had burst open, her eyes abruptly filled with smarting tears. Furiously she bit her lips, in a valiant attempt to force them back, but in vain; a big round drop rolled down her cheek. She felt it fall on her hand, and turned her head still more, so that Al could not see. She would have died rather than have him see—now. Why was he so cruel?

"What you crying for, Janice?" Al inquired startlingly.

"I'm n-not c-crying."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not!"

"Look at me," he ordered gently.

She shook her head, not daring to trust her voice.

"Look at me, Janice!" Al repeated, and there was a magic, compelling something in his tone that forced her to raise her eyes, glistening like diamonds in the afternoon sunshine, to his. "Why, Janice," Al said softly, "I wouldn't hurt you for the world. Why—I love you, Janice. It's you I want to marry. I've loved you ever since that day when I first saw you, when Sam Pickett tried to tell me that he had you roped, tied, and branded. Don't you know I love you, Janice?"

"Don't, Al!" she cried wretchedly. "Don't, please. You're only making it so much harder for me. I'm going to marry Sam Pickett. I promised him."

"Shucks!" said Al indulgently. "That don't mean a thing. You don't love Sam, do you, Janice?"

Emphatically she shook her head.

"But I've got to marry him, just the same. Can't you understand, Al? It was on poor dad's account—so he wouldn't lose his ranch."

"Your dad wouldn't want you to be unhappy, would he, Janice?"

"I wasn't going to let him know—how unhappy I was."

"Get down from your horse and sit beside me on this big rock," Al ordered. "I'm going to tell you a story. They's tears in it, and some smiles too, Janice—only more smiles than tears."

Wonderingly, hopefully, Janice obeyed. She sat on the rock while Al told his story, and in the course of the story, while all Janice's torturing doubts were dissipated like mists before the morning sun, what was more natural than that his arm should find its way around her shoulders, protectingly, and her head should rest against him?

"So you see it's like this," Al concluded. "I'm going to have rafts of money, and you and I are going to pitch in together and help your dad put his Three Star Ranch back where it used to be, at the head of the column. That's right, ain't it, Janice?"

She nodded happily, blushing a little as the masterful young Mr. Foster—or perhaps we now ought to call him Hollister—drew her lips tenderly to his.

"I told Sam Pickett I'd marry him, Al," she confessed shyly, after a minute or two, "because it seemed as if I had to, even if it broke my heart. But I didn't let him kiss me. I—I just couldn't! He wanted to and—oh, you should have seen how mad he was at me because I wouldn't let him."

"I bet he was," said Al, and then he kissed her again.

THE END

THE BALLAD OF THE HOMESICK TENDERFOOT

I'M homesick, gosh, I'm homesick to go back home once more;
I want to hear the street cars go a-clanging past my door.
I'm sick of all this sagebrush and this dog-goned alkali,
I want to see the buildings that go tow'ring toward the sky.
I'm sick of branding cattle and of mending barbed-wire fence;
I'd chuck the whole darned business for the sum of thirty cents
And go back East to where the only cows I'll ever see
Will be the well-done steaks that dolled-up waiters bring to me.

I'm sitting here and thinking of the days I used to know
When night-time always meant a dance or girl and music show,
The afternoons that always meant a ball game or a ride
Along some smooth, paved highway with a sweet girl by my side.
But things are now some diff'rent since I came away out West—
When night-time comes I seek my bunk and take a well-earned rest.
The afternoons are mostly spent in rounding up the strays,
And when I ride, I ride a bronc of most uncertain ways.

I'm homesick, I'll admit. I want to see macadam streets,
And go to bed at 2 A.M. and sleep between some sheets.
I want to be where I can look out any time of night
And see the bright reflection of the way that's gay and white.
For now the only lights I see when night falls o'er the plain
Are twinkling stars and moonbeams and the headlights of a train—
Of a train away off yonder. Come on, broncho, raise a dust,
'Cause that train is going Eastward, and I'm going, too, or bust.

Lester Raymond Cash.

Luck

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Author of "The Desert's Price," "Bonanza," "Troubled Waters," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

PETER MORAN is a quiet man. At school he was thought lacking in courage; but really he always had nerve when he needed it. During the war he is awarded the Distinguished Service Cross because he is not afraid to save the life of his old schoolmate, Tim Murphy, under shell fire—just as he had broken his leg, when a schoolboy, showing little red-headed Janet Carey that he was not afraid to jump off a woodshed. Several years later when he returns to Hilltown, his native town, looking for work, he happens to save Janet Carey and her mother from a holdup with which Jack Meredith, Janet's *fiancé*, who is accompanying them, cannot cope. Mr. James Carey, Janet's father, who is president of the First National Bank of Hilltown, gives Peter a job as a pay roll guard. In a holdup of a shipment of money for Petrolia, a near-by oil boom town, the bank auto driver is killed and Peter is badly wounded, though he manages to kill one of the bandits. When Peter emerges from the hospital he expresses a desire to search Petrolia for traces of the bandits.

CHAPTER IX.

THE POKER GAME.

UNTIL recently Petrolia had been a country farming town named Centerville. It had gone its calm and rather sleepy way without any particular interest in stocks except as these reflected the price of wheat and cattle. On Saturdays the place had taken on a certain liveliness, due to the number of farmers and young people from the outlying country who had driven in to see a moving picture show or to eat ice cream. But even the activity on that day had nothing feverish about it.

A change had come over the spirit of its dreams. Peter stepped off the big interurban car into a Western town on the boom. Excitement, energy, bustle were in the air.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for August 7.

The streets were crowded, so much so that many people were continually stepping off the sidewalks to get past. Loaded trucks rumbled along on their way to the oil field. Houses and business blocks were going up by the score. On vacant lots tents had been pitched and these flaunted pennants announcing themselves as restaurants, offices of brokers, and rooming houses. Stands had been run up for the sale of sandwiches and "hot dogs." In the air were sounds of hammer and saw, of snorting cars, of men's voices hawking wares.

Peter drifted along Main Street, carrying his suit case with him, his eyes open for a place to put up. Men jostled him as they crowded past, not knowing he was there. The faces of most of them had a strained, nervous look. They were afraid that the fortune they saw just ahead might escape their grasp if they did not worry. It struck Peter that the atmosphere was unreal, feverish, that Petrolia was a gamble rather than a solid fact.

This sense of unreality increased in him after he had found a room and descended once more to the street. He dropped into the stock exchange and picked up snatches of talk in which dollars seemed to be counters rather than substantial realities.

"—cleaned up fifty thousand on Z. Z. and took a flyer on Painted Dog."

"—down three thousand feet. I'd ought to know to-morrow whether I'm a millionaire or a bum."

Peter passed two men near the door. One had the other buttonholed. "—a sure-fire proposition, but I can't quite swing it myself. I'll let you in on a half interest for thirty thousand. Of course, that's chicken feed for such a gilt-edged lease, right up against the Johnnie K. But I'm kinda in a jam right now."

The other shook his head. "Looks good, Steve, but I haven't time to monkey with it. You'll make a big clean up, but I'm too darned busy to know which way to turn, what with the Jack Pot number 3 coming in this week and—"

These men were roughly dressed, some of them unshaven. One of them he saw later waiting on table at a restaurant. Was this stage money they talked about so glibly or was he the only poverty-stricken man in camp?

At a lunch counter Peter fell into talk with a brown-faced youth who sat on the adjoining stool. He asked Peter to pass the salt and confided the information that this was a good hash-house to eat at. From this opening Peter presently learned that the youngster's name was Jim Dunn, that he had been punching cows in Montana until he had been bitten by the get-rich-quick microbe, and that he owned ten thousand shares in the Never Say Die and fifteen hundred in the Damfino.

They strolled out together into the roaring street. It was night and Petrolia had lit ten thousand lights and was devoting itself to hectic pleasure. Jazz bands tore the immense silence of the Rockies to shreds. Booted feet shuffled in crowded dance halls. Saloons catered to customers with hardly a pretense of respecting the Volstead Act.

"Like to see the roulette wheel spin for a few whirls?" Dunn asked.

"Surest thing you know," Peter replied. "But I'm practically on my uppers. Not a bean to spend on the little round ball."

"That's all right. I know the guy who's doorkeeper at this joint. We don't have to play. They figure if we don't to-night, we will some other night."

"I suppose the place is protected."

"Must be, don't you reckon? Somebody gets his rake-off all right. It's a block this way an' a block up."

The gaming place was upstairs. They had to pass two doorkeepers before they were admitted. The first gave a signal to the second who passed them on.

Peter found himself in a large room in which perhaps a hundred people were crowded. Some were constantly drifting in and out. About half of them were gathered round poker, roulette, and faro tables, playing the game of their choice. Others stood back of them and watched. Occasionally, some player was cleaned out or cashed in his chips. Some one standing back of him at once slipped into the vacated chair.

The two young men loitered for a few minutes at the wheel. One pallid-faced gamer checked his plays in a little book.

He was evidently using a system, as so many do at Monte Carlo. Most of those about him made their bets more casually and almost at haphazard.

Moran and Dunn passed to the poker table. As they moved forward, Peter's gaze fastened on a pair of heavy, rounded shoulders. There came over him a little shock of recognition. He had seen a pair very like them not long since hunched over the wheel of a flivver. It had been his intention to stand behind them, but instead he circled the table so as to face the owner of the shoulders.

Some one began to deal, and the man with the slouch looked up indifferently. His eyes met those of Peter. The man was Tim Murphy.

"'Fraid Cat Moran!" he exclaimed, almost involuntarily.

"Peter Moran," corrected his former schoolmate.

Murphy accepted the amendment sulkily. Probably he remembered an unfortunate little episode in France. "That's what I meant to say."

He gathered up his cards, pinched them together, and slowly slid the edges apart.

"By me," he growled.

The second man passed, but the third opened the pot. When it came his turn Murphy backed in. After the draw the pot was raised. Murphy stayed, but at the second raise threw down his hand with a curse. From his pocket he drew a large roll of bills to buy more chips. He peeled off the two outside ones and tossed them to an attendant. Peter saw the denomination of one of them. It was a fifty. Evidently the game was not for small stakes.

Peter watched it, sizing up the players. There were six of them. The one to the right of Murphy was a big-framed, outdoor man dressed in corduroys and boots laced to the calf. From appearance he might be guessed a well-driller, probably a contractor rather than a foreman. He played a liberal but a shrewd game.

Next to him sat a cold-eyed pallid man with a poker face, expressionless, merciless. Harrison the others called him. He was dressed in an expensive suit, but one a little too loud for good taste. A professional gambler, Peter guessed. To his right was a small wizened man who might be anything inconspicuous from the proprietor of a shooting gallery to a photographer. His name, it appeared, was Johnson. After Johnson came Butch Caraway, another professional gambler Peter presently guessed. He was dressed as a cattleman and affected the bluff hearty manner of one. The last man, the one on Murphy's left, was a youth, a lunger, called Bud.

Murphy had been the heaviest loser, with the possible exception of Johnson. As Peter watched the game he had a feeling that the dramatic pot of the evening had not yet appeared. If the two professional gamblers were in league, there was no evidence of it. This was to be expected. Their work would not be coarse. They would not give themselves away, except so far as the play told its own story. Peter looked for gestures, words, ways of holding or laying down cigars, and knew quite well that if the two had a code he would not be able to interpret it.

Of course, he might be all wrong. Harrison and Caraway might not be professionals. That was merely a guess, and he was helped to it by the way they handled their cards and chips, by the ruthlessness with which they cross-raised the coughing little consumptive out of a twenty-dollar pot which he lost the nerve to call when he had the best hand. Bud was living on a remittance from his people in Ohio, Jim Dunn whispered to Peter, and he was probably playing his latest check. So far he had held his own, but he was a sheep, ripe for the shearing and it was only a question of time till he would be cleaned out.

That is, if they decided it was worth while to clean him out. That would depend on whether they were playing for general results or for a specific end, in which latter case he could deduce that Tim Murphy's big roll would probably be the basis of attack. The two tinhorns might prefer, if they were playing for Tim, not to roil the waters until they had hooked and landed their big fish. A change in the personnel of the table was sometimes disturbing. Therefore they might prefer to let Bud stay. He was small fry anyhow.

Dunn was ready to move on. "Ready to go?" he asked.

"Just a minute."

Peter was watching intently a play that had come up. Bud opened a pot. His trembling fingers were a give-away to Peter. The boy had a good hand and could not control his excitement. Murphy dropped his cards. The man in corduroys did the same. Harrison stayed out. Johnson shoved in chips.

"The hide might as well go with the horns," he said. "Me, I haven't won a pot in an hour."

Butch Caraway met the bet and raised ten dollars. Bud hesitated. His black, shining eyes studied once more his cards. He hung for a moment in doubt, then raised twenty. Johnson dropped out.

Caraway laughed in the steel-trap manner of open-hearted geniality he achieved in his rôle of cattleman.

"Looks like I stepped into something. Well, I'm aimin' to find out whether that boy's bluffin' or not." He raised the bet twenty more.

Once more Bud sat for a moment worrying. He had a ten full. From where he stood Peter had had a flash at it. They boy was not considering another raise. If he called and lost he would be broke, with no remittance for another two weeks. On the other hand—

He pushed his chips in for a call.

Caraway flung his hand into the discard with another laugh. "Caught without the goods," he explained. "Well, I always do bluff once in a game."

Bud raked in the pot, his hands shaking. He was nearly seventy dollars ahead of the game, and he had a queer feeling that it was by a fluke.

Peter had another view of it. He was convinced that this was "come-on stuff." Caraway had advertised himself as a plunger, as a player who might draw to a flush, miss filling it, and bluff. Unless Peter was mistaken, the real play of the night was now due, while the effect of this was still in the mind. There might be a little more skirmishing, but soon now the trap would be baited.

During the next round Caraway lost twice, rather heavily, to Harrison. Apparently he was still plunging, trying to win back what he had lost. He was building up the proper impression, and Peter reflected cynically that it was not costing him a cent if he and Harrison were partners.

It came Harrison's turn to deal. He dropped a card and stooped to get it. Peter stood motionless, eyes fixed, eager to miss nothing of which was to follow. This was crude, this dropping of a card in order to switch decks, but it was a simple method if one could get away with it.

Johnson opened, Caraway stayed, and Bud dropped his cards into the discard. Murphy raised, and the big contractor saw the raise.

"Got to hoist her again to keep the pikers out," Harrison said, and raised, pushing in a stack of five-dollar chips.

Johnson wrinkled up his wizened face. This was getting steep. But he had a good hand, and three aces may easily become a full house. He stayed. Caraway also saw the raise.

Abruptly Murphy announced: "I'm playin' back, you understand."

"How much back?" demanded Harrison.

"My pile."

"Suits me," Harrison said. "Hop to it."

Murphy raised the pot fifty dollars.

"Count me out," the contractor announced. "I know when I've had enough, an' I don't mind tellin' the world that I'm laying down a mighty good hand." He showed to those behind him a queen high straight.

"High enough for me right now," Harrison said, counting out fifty dollars worth of chips and pushing them forward.

"Too high for me," Johnson added, but he, too, met the raise.

Caraway woke up to take the play. "Hell, I've got some hand my own self. Kick her a hundred," he boomed.

Murphy's roll was on the table in front of him. He peeled off six fifties. "Didn't some one say something about keepin' pikers out?" he growled.

"I said that," Harrison said, looking hard at his cards, "and I'm wondering whether I'll have the darned fool luck to get the card I want. If I do—hmp!"

"You stayin'?" Murphy demanded.

"Wish I knew what you had, young fellow," Harrison replied. "Yes—yes, I'll see it."

Johnson felt very unhappy. There were better hands than his out, and he knew it. But he was in very deep, and if he happened to hook an ace or even a pair he would be sitting pretty. He could not drop out before the draw. But he availed himself of the player's usual privilege.

"I've got only forty-six dollars in chips left," he said. "Make yore bets on the side, gentlemen."

Harrison adjusted the pot, putting to one side chips to the value of three hundred and eight dollars. To this pile, Caraway added two hundred, less forty-six which went into the general pot.

"Cards, gentlemen?" Harrison asked, picking up the deck.

Johnson took two, Caraway one, Murphy one. The dealer put down the deck.

"You standin' pat?" Caraway asked sharply.

"Why, yes. Thought I would." Without looking at his cards Harrison added another word: "Check."

"Same here," Johnson said. He had drawn a pair of deuces, but in any event he was out of the betting.

Caraway pinched his cards slowly apart, then counted out five hundred dollars in denominations of one hundred. Looking at Murphy, Peter could see that this gave him a mental jolt. For the first time it occurred to him that his hand might be beaten. Evidently, the ex-service man had a very strong hand, but there are great possibilities in some one-card draws if the drawer holds the right combination to begin with.

Murphy's thoughts could almost have been read aloud. What did this bet mean? Was Caraway bluffing, trying to drive the others out without a show-down? Or had he bettered his hand, made it impregnable? He might hold fours, or even a straight flush? Or he might still be trying to bluff his way through.

Murphy called. Harrison threw his cards into the discard.

"Too stiff for me," he said. "I wish now I'd busted my flush and tried for a big hand."

Johnson spread his cards on the table face up. "Mine's an ace full. What does it get me?" he asked.

"It may get you second money," jeered Caraway. "Mine's a straight flush, queen high." He visibly crowed over Harrison. "I busted my flush, an' drew the jack of hearts."

Murphy stared at the five cards, the eight, nine, ten, jack, and queen of hearts. For a moment he sat there, silent and motionless; then he ripped his cards in two and flung them away with a violent oath. He pushed back his chair, so that it fell to the ground.

"I've had enough of this damned game," he cried, and strode out of the room.

"Me, too," announced Johnson, rising.

It was the signal for the game to break up. The others cashed their chips.

"Wonder what Murphy had," the contractor said, and to satisfy his curiosity, he gathered from the floor the ten torn pieces of cardboard. These he fitted into place on the table. Murphy had held four kings and an ace.

Moran and Dunn walked out of the room, downstairs, and into the lights of the blaring night.

"What did you think about that play?" Moran asked.

"I think that for a guy who plays as wild as Caraway he was damned lucky," the cowboy answered. "Ain't that what you think?"

"Not exactly. I've got private notions of my own, and one of 'em is that a fellow who plays against Harrison and Caraway would be lucky to get out with his shirt on."

"You think the game was crooked?"

"Figure it out for yourself. Harrison dealt the hand. He helped Caraway cross-raise the pot. Murphy has four kings, and Caraway busts a flush to draw for a straight flush—and gets it."

"Well, he was playin' wild."

"Who against?"

"Why, against Harrison," Dunn said, after a moment's reflection. Then, after another pause while he mulled it over:

"By George, do you reckon it could be thataway, like you think?"

"I could see it coming for ten minutes. Notice how Harrison dropped a card and stooped for it?"

"He switched decks, you think. By gosh, I'll bet he did."

They parted presently, Moran to go to his room. He had been watching more than a crooked card game. He knew that the money which had passed across the table from Murphy to the poker sharks belonged to the First National Bank of Hilltown.

Though he had no legal proof of it he knew that he could put a finger on the first of the robbers. In the account book of his mind he wrote a number and a name. It read: 1. Tim Murphy.

CHAPTER X.

GOING AHEAD.

SO far, so good. But what next?

It was all very well to be sure in his own mind that Tim Murphy was one of the bandits. It was quite another thing to get legal proof of this. Unfortunately the bills of the express shipment had not been marked or their numbers taken.

The fact that Murphy was playing a game far beyond his legitimate means was not evidence that he was gambling with stolen money. A good many men in camp had already acquired great sums, such as they had never in their lives possessed before. Such acquisitions of temporary wealth are incidents in the history of all boom camps. A man cannot be arrested, or at least convicted, on suspicion; and even if he could be the immediate result would be to drive the other robbers into flight.

The trouble was that it would be difficult to meet Murphy on a more friendly basis. The man had two grudges against him. He had wounded his vanity by publicly thrashing him, and afterward saving his life. Both were offenses which to a man of Tim Murphy's disposition were unforgiveable. He was of a sour, grudging type. He had hated Peter when he had beaten him before their messmates, and he had hated him more when he had dragged him back to safety that day in the Argonne. It requires more generosity to receive a favor than to give one, and Tim was not generous.

Peter set himself to discover who Tim's associates were. He made inquiries, using Dunn to help him, though the cowboy had no idea that his new acquaintance was more than casually interested. Within twenty-four hours Peter knew that Tim Murphy was staying at a boarding house run by a Mrs. Farrar. In less than half an hour from that time he was opening the gate and walking up to her porch.

A very pretty girl opened the door to his knock. She was soft-eyed and dark and slender and shy. Peter explained that he was looking for a place to board.

She shook her head. "Afraid we're full. I'll ask mother."

Mrs. Farrar was a competent looking woman, whose mind and thoughts were mainly occupied, he guessed, with the business of running a good boarding house. She listened to what he had to say, and began to explain that she really had all the boarders she could accommodate.

On occasion Peter's smile could be very winning. It was now.

"But you'll make a place for me, won't you, Mrs. Farrar?" he asked. "I want home cooking like yours. Restaurants suit some people, but they don't suit me. I've heard about your table. Naturally I want to come here. If you want references—"

"I guess you're reference enough, young man. Do you want to room here, too, or just board?"

"I'd like to room, too, please."

"I don't see where I'd put you."

"The little sewing room. Perhaps he wouldn't mind if it is a small room, mother," suggested the girl. "There's that bedstead in the barn, and we have a mattress for it."

"I'll bring the bedstead in and put it up myself," Peter volunteered. "I don't want to be any more trouble than I can help. It's good of you to take me. I appreciate it very much."

Mrs. Farrar had not said she would take him, but she gave in now. "All right. The room isn't much, but if you don't like it don't blame me."

Three hours later Peter had taken possession and installed his belongings. The room was clean, and when he had arrived the girl was arranging a scarf on the small table beneath the mirror. She brought in a waste-paper basket and set it beside the stand, and afterward an eiderdown coverlet for the bed. Each time she knocked at the door, though it was open, and waited for his invitation to come in.

"The blind doesn't work very well," she explained. "It won't go up. See."

He took it out of the socket, wound the spring, and put it back in place.

"Thank you," she said shyly. Then, as she beat a swift retreat, "Dinner is at six," she called back.

With him she left an impression of something more exquisite than mere prettiness, of a sweet and fragile personality, one that naturally appeals to the chivalrous instinct of men for protection. She had that most attractive charm, wistfulness. Very likely, he reflected, it had nothing to do with the quality of her inner life. It might be merely accidental. But it afforded her a certain distinction, something that set her apart.

Peter was down at dinner on time. The boarders all sat at one long table, over which Mrs. Farrar presided, and her daughter waited on the guests. The food was good, and well cooked.

The guests interested Peter. He checked off each one in his mind as they came in. There was a pert young stenographer of an oil company, named Maisie. If she had another name Peter did not learn what it was during the meal, because everybody called her by her first name. She was popular and slangy, and quite able to take care of herself. There was an old bookkeeper, who looked at the others over the rim of his glasses instead of through them. There was a nice young boy, a little bashful, called David Summers, who also worked for an oil company, and was manifestly in love with Sid Farrar. Also there were others whom Peter tabulated and put out of his mind as of no consequence.

Tim Murphy came in late. With him was a pallid youth whom Peter remembered instantly. He had last observed him slouching past the Hilltown First National Bank building toward a flivver on the other side of the street. His putty-colored face and ferret eyes, and a certain manner of furtive bravado, had registered themselves on Peter's mind. No doubt he had seen him later behind a gun at the station, but of that he had no recollection. He had then had no time to focalize faces.

At sight of Peter Tim stopped abruptly. Peter rose and offered his hand. Murphy took it sulkily, because he did not know what else to do with it.

"Funny you're boarding here, too," Peter said.

The other man—the one with the ferret eyes in the putty face—stared at Peter as if he was some one risen from the dead. His eyelids narrowed and slid away.

"Meet Mr. Hall," Murphy said out of the corner of his mouth. "Skate, this is Mr. Moran—served in France with him."

For a moment Hall's clumsy hand rested in Peter's fingers. It was a good deal like a cold fish in the feel of it.

"Glameetim," the pallid man said, without looking at his new acquaintance. Peter translated the word, "Glad to meet him."

It occurred to him that he would not care to meet Mr. Hall in a dark alley if the later had a grudge against him, or knew that he was carrying money. Unless Peter did him gross injustice he was one of the new type of "bad man," a dope fiend who will do murder without compunction in cold blood.

Hall took a chair, slid one look at Mrs. Farrar's daughter, and appeared to devote his mind to food. Peter observed that Tim Murphy also glanced at Sid Farrar before he sat down. There was a quality in both these looks that disturbed him. She was a rare and lovely little flower, and men like these had no right to desire her covetously. There was something of desecration in it.

Moreover, he presently noticed something else, and this was even more disturbing. Sid was afraid of them. In the case of Murphy her eyes flashed a challenge denying her fear, but she never looked at

Hall. She waited on him, her eyelids downcast, almost as a slave might serve her lord. Peter did not understand it. Why should she fear either of these men? What could there be in common between this clean young thing and these two outlaws, one a ruffian, the other a rat from the underworld? It was as though they held something over her, as though she lived under the shadow of a threat.

Peter took occasion to finish his dinner at the same time as Tim Murphy. They met in the doorway, and he stepped aside to give Tim precedence.

"Hard luck last night," he said as they walked along the upstairs hall. "Some time I'd like to talk to you about that game. I'm no expert, but there was something about it didn't look just straight to me."

"What you mean?" demanded Murphy, turning at his door.

"Maybe I'm wrong. Very likely I am. You're a lot better card player than I. But I got a notion of a frame-up. I was on the outside, of course, and could see some things better."

"A frame-up? Who rigged it?" Then, abruptly, he turned into his room. "Come in here a minute," he invited over his shoulder.

This was what Peter had hoped for. He followed into the room. Murphy closed the door.

"All right. Unload it. Let's hear what you suspect."

Peter told him and gave his reasons.

Murphy listened, sulkily but attentively.

"So you think they rimmed me?" he said at last.

"Card sharps can rim anybody, no matter how good players they are, when they are not looking for crookedness."

"I don't remember Harrison dropping that card. But he did, you say?"

"Yes."

Murphy gnashed his teeth. "By heaven, if they did!" he cried, and slammed his fist down on the table.

There came a knock on the door, and at Tim's invitation it opened to let in Hall.

He stood, the cigarette drooping from a corner of his mouth, sliding eyes on Moran. Murphy rose.

"Much obliged," he said to Peter gruffly.

Peter understood that he had reached the limit of his welcome. He left.

The door had no sooner closed on him than Hall was catching nervously at Murphy's coat lapels.

"Know who your friend is, who you're entertaining, who you're inviting into your room an' hobnobbin with?"

Tim shook him off impatiently. "Know him? Sure I know him. Went to school with him—served in the army with him. 'Fraid Cat Moran. That's who."

"You fool! He's the man who guarded the haul we took, the guy who killed poor Spike Slattery. Tha's who he is."

Murphy stared at him. The conviction broke on him that his confederate was right. He had seen the guard's name mentioned as Moran, but he had never associated the name with Peter. Why should he? So far as he knew, 'Fraid Cat was a thousand miles away. And there are plenty of Morans.

But he knew now, by some instinct, that Peter had been the man. It was the sort of thing Peter would do—stand up and fire back while half a dozen men were firing at him.

His eyes grew hard in reflection of his thoughts.

Meanwhile Peter was in his room next door making a second entry in the record of his memory.

It read: 2. Skate Hall.

CHAPTER XI.

PETER DECLARES WAR.

ALONE in his room, Peter set himself to mull over the situation. He had made progress, decidedly; not through any skill of his own, but by sheer luck. He had this advantage of the professional detectives that he had been able to spot two of the bandits by recognizing them. But was it an advantage? How could he turn it to good account?

He had made an attempt to get into a more friendly relationship with Tim Murphy by warning him of the card sharps. There was no valid reason why Tim should

hate him. In their school days Tim had slammed him around a good deal. He had stopped that in France. Honors were even. Later he had had the misfortune to do Tim a service by lugging him back to cover, but the fellow ought not to blame him for that. There had been nothing personal in it. Peter felt that he might have had a chance to wipe out or at least diminish the other's resentment if it had not been for this Skate Hall.

But he did not deceive himself. He had known in that instant when his eyes had met the startled ones of Hall in the dining room, in that flash of time before the gaze of the putty-faced man had slid away, that he had been recognized as the guard of the express shipment.

Already this Skate Hall was busy obliterating any impression he might have made on Murphy. They would no doubt be asking each other what he was doing here? Why had he come to Petrolia? Why in particular to the boarding house of Mrs. Farrar? Was he trailing them? Did he know they were two of the men who had attacked him? What did he intend to do about it? If he was a sleuth, what was the best way to circumvent him?

What immediate effect would Skate Hall's recognition of him have? Would all the robbers, all of them who were on the ground, at once decamp for San Francisco, Chicago, or some other remote spot? Or would they instead watch him and his actions, prepared to put him out of the way if their suspicions should become acute?

But there was one thing in Peter's favor. There had appeared in the Hilltown papers a little story—an inspired one of his own fabrication which reached the newspapers by an apparently careless mention of the fact by Carey to reporters—that he had been dropped from the pay roll of the bank because its officials were not satisfied with his conduct as guard. The story went on to say that he had told so many conflicting details of the holdup, that his accounts had so varied, as to give rise to a suspicion that he was keeping back something. The papers had not said in so many words that he was suspected of complicity in the robbery. They left this to be inferred.

Peter knew that the bandits must have read this story. No doubt they read everything printed in each of the Hilltown papers on the subject of the raid on the van. They would do this in self-defense, watching for hints as to what the police were doing in the matter.

Naturally, then, if Peter was out of a job he would drift to Petrolia. The place was a lodestone for all floaters within a radius of several hundred miles. It might be by sheer chance, so they would figure, that he had come to board with Mrs. Farrar.

He knew he was in danger, that he must watch his step carefully, and the thought was not a comforting one. Petrolia was a camp rather than a small city in its point of view. A shot in the dark might finish him, and the inquiries that followed would be perfunctory. He could be murdered with a reasonable sense of immunity on the part of the killer.

While Peter lay on his bed in the darkness, face up toward the ceiling, there had penetrated to him sounds which at first he had not identified. They were smothered sounds, not loud, made by some one on the other side of the inner wall of his room. He listened. They were sobs, and they came from a woman or a girl rather than a child. He guessed that the girl was Sid Farrar. Probably she had the bedroom next to his. It was a small room, one of the sort likely to be reserved for one of the household when the best had to be rented.

Peter was sorry for her. He knew that Sid was in trouble of some kind. But there was nothing he could do now. A man, a stranger, cannot intrude on a girl's tears to offer assistance which probably is not welcome. He made up his mind to be very considerate of her, to try to convey to her the feeling that he understood she was in deep waters and would help if called upon.

What could be disturbing her? Was she in love with one of these scoundrels? Murphy was a virile sort of ruffian. He might catch a girl's fancy. But where did Hall come in? And he could swear that it was Hall of whom she was most afraid.

He heard another sound, the turning of a doorknob; also the slight creak of a door, followed by a startled exclamation. There

came to him the low murmur of a voice interrupted by protests, and hard on that a wailing, "No—no—no!"

Peter listened, shamelessly, his ear close to the wall, all his senses attuned to tenseness. He could not make out the words, though he knew the murmur had grown more imperative, more insistent. There was the sound of a movement, other sounds which he interpreted as a little scuffle, then a voice in pain.

"Don't! You're hurting me," it cried.

The listening man waited for no more. He slipped from his own room, opened the next door, and stepped inside.

In the room were two persons beside himself. One was Sid Farrar, the other Skate Hall. The man held the girl's wrist in his fingers, and he was twisting her arm. An evil grin slit his lips.

At sound of the door opening he turned, then dropped the girl's arm and reached toward his hip. Peter had him by the throat before he could complete that gesture.

"You would, eh?" cried Moran, and his fingers tightened. "You rat! You dirty little rat!"

Peter's other hand went round to the hip pocket and drew from it an automatic. This he slipped into his coat pocket.

Hall's throat gurgled. He began to grow black in the face.

"You'll kill him," Sid cried, her little fists caught together in a gesture of distress.

"No fear. He's got nine lives, the vermin." But Peter loosened his grip and presently dropped his hand. With the fellow's automatic in his pocket he had drawn his teeth.

Hall collapsed into a chair and lay there coughing and clutching at his man-handled throat. He was at first beyond even curses.

"What's wrong? What was he trying to do?" Moran asked of the girl.

She opened her lips to speak, but she did not say anything. There had come a change over her face. She was again in the grip of that fear born of the fact that this Hall had some power over her. Her lips closed.

"It's—nothing. He was just annoying me," she said at last.

Peter smiled, the warm, friendly smile which carried comfort with it. "Let me be your friend, Miss Farrar," he said. "I'll see he doesn't annoy you again."

"No—no! It's all right," she insisted. Her haunted eyes denied the words.

"Nothing I'd like better than to show this fellow where he gets off. We'll have your mother chuck him out to-night."

"Oh, no—no! I don't want that," she cried. "Please, Mr. Moran, there isn't anything you can do. Nothing at all. Everything is all right. It is. It really is."

She pleaded with him as though she were afraid that by freeing her of this bit of humanity's scum he would wreck her life. Peter could not understand it. There was something back of it, something he could not get. It could not be that she loved or ever had loved Hall. The tie between them had nothing to do with affection. It was rather fear—stark, deadly, paralyzing fear. But why—why? And if she was afraid why did she refuse his help, why decline to shift the burden to broader shoulders?

"But why not? What are you afraid of? This fellow—there's no more substance to him than there is to an empty eggshell. We can crush him like—like that." His lean, nervous fingers closed strongly into a knotted fist.

"But no—no—I don't want you to interfere. Please, Mr. Moran."

"You're afraid of him. If you'll only tell me what it is—"

"No. It's all right. Really, it is," she pleaded, and he could see that she was almost as much afraid of rash action on his part as she had been of Hall.

"He's got you scared. Forget it. He's not dangerous. Tell me what's wrong and I'll protect you. If I can't, the law will."

Once more she broke into low-voiced protest, beseeching him to forget what he had seen.

Hall gathered himself from the chair and cast one sidling, venomous look at Peter. His fingers were still caressing his injured throat.

"One o' these days, right soon, it 'll be you or me," he snarled. "I'll get you sure as you're a foot high."

He walked to the door and passed out. Peter had said he was not dangerous. But he knew that was not true. The fellow was more dangerous than a rattlesnake; for he had as few compunctions, but, unlike that reptile, would give no warning just before he struck.

"If you won't tell me, tell your mother what the trouble is," Peter pleaded. "You haven't got this thing right, whatever it is. You have no business having anything to do with that fellow—or Murphy, either."

She sent a startled look toward him. "You—you're quite wrong," she said. "It's only that he wants to pay me attentions—and I don't like him. That's all."

Peter knew this was not the truth, but obviously he could not tell her so. He repeated that she ought to go to her mother and put the situation up to her. "She'll give this fellow the right about mighty promptly," he prophesied.

The girl shook her head. "No. I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Moran. It's good of you. But—I'm quite able to take care of myself. And I want you to promise me not to say anything to mother. I don't want to worry her."

"I'll not promise that," he said, shaking his head, "unless you'll promise me something, that if he bothers you again you'll come straight to me."

"That's a bargain," she cried eagerly.

He had the uncomfortable conviction that he was pledged and she was not, for he did not believe that she would keep her word.

But he had done his best. There was no way to force her to give him her confidence. He turned to go.

She followed him toward the door, and laid her hand timidly on his coat sleeve.

"You won't think I don't appreciate—what you did for me—and what you want to do? I—I think it's—sweet of you." Her voice broke. There were tears in her eyes.

"The best way to appreciate it is to accept my offer," he said.

"Oh, I will—I will—if I need any help," she promised.

And that, for whatever it might mean, much or little, he was forced to accept.

Peter was very careful how he left her room and passed into the passage. He did not want to stop a bullet while he was in the hall. After careful investigation he slipped out, stole to his own room, and whipped open the door, automatic in hand. Hall might be lurking in some dark corner ready to pour shot into him as he appeared. He was very nervous as his fingers groped for the button that switched on the light.

He breathed a deep breath of relief when he looked round and found that he was alone and for the present safe.

Peter did not deceive himself. He had declared war upon this gangster personally as well as professionally. The fellow would call a conference of his confederates and they would take steps to get rid of him. That was certain, at least, as certain as anything can be predicted in an uncertain world.

He knew that from this hour he was a marked man.

CHAPTER XII.

PETER PUTS TWO AND TWO TOGETHER

UPON the door of Peter's room next morning there came a gentle tap. He was tying his four-in-hand at the time. Before he unlocked the door he slipped into his coat and dropped the automatic in the right hand pocket. He unlocked the door with his left hand.

The young fellow, David Summers, was standing in the hall. He put his forefinger to his lips by way of caution.

Peter nodded silently and stood aside to let him enter. Then he closed and locked the door after him.

The clerk was a clean, good looking lad, a blond with a clear complexion. Under the skin the warm blood came and went as it does in the cheeks of a young girl. He was saved fom prettiness, from effeminacy, only by a certain quiet steadiness of the blue eyes.

"I wanted to see you, Mr. Moran," the boy said in a low, hurried voice, "because—because you look like a man to me."

Peter waited, without speaking. There is a strategic advantage before a situation

has developed in letting the other party declare himself.

"And I've got a notion—I may be wrong, of course—that you're the Moran who tried to fight off the robbers of the Hilltown First National Bank."

"Yes," admitted Peter.

The young clerk's voice dropped a note lower. "There's something hellish going on in this house. I know it. I can feel it. Yet I can't just put my finger on what it is."

"If I can help you—" Peter let it go at that. He wanted to convey to Summers an assurance that he was with him, but he did not want to direct in any way by suggestion the confidence he was about to receive.

"It's these two fellows that have come here to stay, this Murphy and that Hall. Ever since they came Sid has been different. She used to be care-free, the happiest kid I ever knew, always laughing, kinda from inside, as though she couldn't help it. We'd go out together and dance and have lots of fun. She just bubbled with life. Now—well, she acts as though she was afraid to be happy. Something is scaring her."

"Have you any idea what it is that's scaring her?"

"I have an idea *who*. It's those two fellows—Murphy and Hall."

"How can they frighten her?"

"I don't know, unless—"

"Unless—" Peter stimulated.

"Unless it's about her brother."

"She has a brother then?"

"Yes, a wild young colt. It was through him that these two fellows first came here to board."

"When was that?" Peter asked.

"Well, they came first right after the Christmas holidays. They only stayed a few days then. Sid wasn't worrying about them any—not at that time. She didn't like them, and she let them know it. This Murphy tried hard to get her to go out with him. She went once, and after that turned him down cold. The other fellow didn't even get that far."

"Just when did they leave?"

"Well, let's see. They must have gone about the third or fourth of January. Earl went with them."

"Earl is the brother?"

"Yes. He came back a couple of days later and stuck around for a little while, then went back to Hilltown."

Peter felt that he was on the verge of a discovery, one that might reasonably explain why this girl cowered before these crooks.

He did not want to show undue eagerness, so he offered Summers a cigarette and lit one himself. He sat in the armchair, and flung a leg with obvious carelessness over the arm.

"When did he go to Hilltown?"

"I don't know the exact date. Let me see. It was near the beginning of a week. I remember that because he was packing when Sid and I came back from a Sunday picnic in the hills."

Peter took a look at a calendar. "Let's check this up. I don't know that it's important, but if we can find out when the little girl began to worry perhaps we can get at the cause. Was it the week of January 8 he left?"

Dave Summers wrinkled his brow in thought. "Yes, on Monday of that week."

"That would be the ninth?"

"Yes, if Monday is the ninth."

"When did he come back?"

"He didn't come back. He hasn't been here since."

"But—where is he? Isn't his mother worried?"

"If she is, she doesn't show it. He's that way—a rover, always drifting away and never writing."

"He hasn't written either, then?"

"No."

It was as though Peter's warm, pulsating heart had been drenched with ice cold water. Out of his sky the sun had suddenly vanished. Before his mind there appeared a picture—a flashing vision of a garage with a car in it, and in the car the huddled body of a dead youth, slain by a bullet from his revolver. He had to swallow once before he could ask his next question.

"What was Earl like? Describe him."

"Why, a slim young fellow, restless and high-strung, not easily controlled."

"I know, but—what does he look like?"

"Dark—black hair, and kinda tall."

Peter breathed again. He had not killed Sid Farrar's brother. The dead man in the car had been fair-haired, of the Scandinavian type, short and rather heavy set. It was very likely that the slain bandit had been some girl's brother, possibly some woman's lover or husband, but since Peter did not know the woman he escaped the shock of having dealt her a cruel and terrible blow.

"When did these two fellows come back?"

"Let's see. They've been here— It was the twelfth they came back."

"And you noticed that Sid was troubled as soon as they got back?"

"Not right away. We went out to a movie that night, she and I. They came that afternoon while she was uptown, and when she got back they were settled in rooms. She did not like it, but they pay an awfully good price, and I guess Mrs. Farrar hated to turn them down. I remember that night she was quite indignant about it. But when I came back from work next day she was changed. No fight in her—just like she is now."

"I suppose she and her brother quarreled a good deal."

"They'd get furious at each other sometimes, but I never saw a brother and sister more fond of each other than those two. They are awfully close. It's funny, too. Wild as he is, he's just as devoted to her as she is to him. And that's saying a lot, for I think she'd do almost anything in the world for him."

The breakfast gong sounded downstairs. Summers got ready to leave. "What do you think about it?" he asked, his voice still low.

"I'll mull it over. Will these birds be down to breakfast?"

"Not likely. They never get up till about noon."

"I see. By the way, I'm looking for a job in town. If you can find me one—"

"Ever work in an oil field? Our company is sinking a well. Maybe we could use you?"

"No experience," Peter admitted. "But I'd try to be handy—if there's anything you could use a green man at. I'm a bit of an amateur carpenter—hammer and saw work, you understand. Nothing expert."

"I'll see what I can do. I'm interested in the company, so I can probably get a man on if we need another. We've lost a string of tools and are fishing for them right now. I'll talk with our driller to-day."

Peter walked down with Summers to breakfast. He thought he knew now why Sid Farrar was in the power of these men. Her brother was implicated in the express robbery and they were holding it over the girl. Peter had no intention of telling Summers what he suspected, but he meant to have a talk with Sid as soon as he could. He would break through her defenses. After that she would have to accept him as an ally.

His chance came after breakfast. It was her duty to take care of the rooms. Peter intercepted her as she was about to start.

"Come into the parlor a minute," he told her.

She followed him listlessly. "There's no good saying anything more," she said.

He smiled. "Depends what I want to tell you, doesn't it? For instance, if I said I wanted to talk with you about your brother and these scoundrels you'd listen."

She flung a startled look at him. "I'll meet you in the clump of cottonwoods by the river in half an hour."

CHAPTER XIII.

UNDER THE COTTONWOODS.

A LANE beside the house led down to the cottonwoods, but Peter did not take it. He sauntered townward, quite well aware that the two gangsters might be watching him from a window of the boarding house. In fact, he went four blocks before he turned down a street that led to the river. Once at the stream, he retraced his way till he had reached the cottonwoods. Behind a large one he sat down and waited for Sid.

She was late for the appointment. When she arrived she came breathlessly upon him. She, too, had taken a roundabout path.

"They've got binoculars," she said. "I

was afraid they might watch and see I was meeting you. What is it you want to say, Mr. Moran—about my brother?"

He did not ask her why she was afraid they would see her with him if her story was true that she had nothing to fear from these men. Her words were a confession, but one which he had not needed to confirm his opinion. His desire was not to trap her into admissions, but to win her confidence.

"Just this, Miss Farrar. I know a great deal more about these men than you think. If I were to tell you something about myself would you respect my confidence? I've got to know before I go any further that it would be safe with you."

"Of course it would," she said indignantly.

"Ordinarily, yes. You are that kind of a girl. But under the circumstances? You are afraid of these men. No, you needn't deny it. I know you are. The point is whether if you saw a chance, with my help, of freeing yourself from them and perhaps helping your brother at the same time you would line up with me."

She hesitated. It was quite clear that she was afraid of admitting too much and yet wanted to hear more. "I hate them," she said with a sudden intense passion of bitterness.

"You hate them, but you're afraid of them. I will tell you why. You think they have your brother in their power. If I convince you that this isn't true, that the only way to help your brother is to oppose them—"

"What do you mean—my brother in their power?" she asked, eyes fixed on him.

He brushed that aside. "Let's forget that for a moment, Miss Farrar. I'm offering you confidence for confidence. Do you want my help, my friendship—or do you prefer to live in terror of these scoundrels?"

"Oh, I want your help," she cried, and there was a little wail in her voice. "I don't know who you are, or how much you know. But you're good. I know that."

Peter did not argue that point. He knew his goodness was relative, but this was not the occasion for a discussion of abstract ethics. He held out a hand. "We're friends then—and partners?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"Good. To begin with then, I'm the guard who was wounded by the Murphy-Hall gang, defending the express shipment."

Sid gasped. His abrupt disclosure caught her by surprise in two ways; first, in that it told her who he was, and second, by showing her he knew who they were. It was characteristic of her that she thought first of his safety.

"But if they find out who you are!" she exclaimed. "You don't know them. That Skate Hall!" She shuddered.

"I know them," he answered grimly. "And you need not worry about their finding out who I am. They know already."

"Then—what will they do?"

"Murder me, if they can do it safely."

"But you must go away. You must go to-day—now."

"No," he said.

"Why?" she demanded. "Of course you must. Why are you here? Don't you understand? There are others, too, here in town. They will kill you because of Spike Slattery. The newspapers said you—was it you?" Her dilated eyes were fixed on him in a sort of horror, while she flung the question.

"Yes," he answered. "It must have been, because I was the only one shooting at them. What should I have done—run away and let them loot the van?"

"What does that matter now?" She made a little gesture of impatience, almost of despair. "Don't you know that they will not rest, if you are here, until they have destroyed you?"

"Maybe, and maybe not. I'll be there at the time, you know, and I'll be very careful how I give them chances." He said it quietly, with an unperturbed manner that somehow gave her reassurance. This man was strong. His strength was not venomous as was Skate Hall's, nor was it brutal like Tim Murphy's. It seemed to flow through him as a quiet, powerful river does through a placid meadow.

"Why are you here? Why must you stay?" she asked again.

"I'm here to bring these men to justice."

He saw her stiffen, could read the thoughts that raced through her mind. If he brought these men to justice her brother, too, would be caught in the net. She was instantly in arms against him. He set about breaking down this new hostility.

A friendly, charming smile lit the man's eyes. "You're thinking about your brother now. And it's just here that you and I have to be frank with each other. You think he was in this job, that he had been led into it by these fellows. I don't think he was."

She clutched at this with swift pathetic eagerness. "Why don't you think he was?"

"I have my reasons, and I'll tell 'em to you presently. But first give me your reasons why you think he was. Let's get all the facts before us."

"I didn't say I thought he was," she retorted defensively.

"No, but you do. Come, Miss Farrar. I've been frank. In a way I've put my life in your hands by telling you why I'm here. Isn't that an evidence of good faith? How can I help you if you won't tell me what you know, if you continue to distrust me?"

She was silent, thinking, biting her lower lip.

"Even if Earl was led into this thing by these men, it's better to face the fact and see what we can do for him," he went on. "Give me your reasons for thinking he may have been in it, and I'll give mine for my opinion. Perhaps you are wrong. Perhaps I am. Let's weigh the evidence together."

Her anxious eyes again searched his face. She could read nothing in his clear, steadfast eyes but kindness and honesty.

"Why, everything," she replied, her voice breaking for an instant and then steadying. "He was with them. He went to Hilltown with them. He came back, but in a day or two left again. Then—there was the robbery. They came back without him."

"Without him, exactly. That's important. But let's clear up another point first. How do you know they were the bandits—this gang, I mean?"

"I found it out by accident. After they came back, I went to fix their beds in their room. I thought they were out. So I used my house key and walked in. I suppose I must have slipped the key in quietly and turned it quickly. Anyhow, they both jumped to their feet and faced me. They had guns in their hands and the table was just covered with bills and gold. Perhaps they thought the officers had come to get them. I started to go away, but they wouldn't let me. They made me come into the room and they locked the door again." The girl covered her face with her hands, trembling at the recollection of what had taken place.

"Yes," Peter said gently. "They bullied you, of course. They would."

"Yes, they threatened me with dreadful things, especially that Hall. He said he would cut my heart out if I told. But that wasn't the worst."

"No, the worst was that he said your brother was in the holdup, too. Isn't that it?"

"Yes, he said—and Tim Murphy said it, too—that Earl was the one—the one who—who—"

She broke down and began to cry.

"The one who shot the driver. Is that what they said?"

"Yes," she sobbed.

"And that's all you know about it—what they told you?"

"Yes—except that since then both of them have been pestering me."

"Annoying you with love-making. That what you mean?"

"Yes." She went back to what was for her the more important issue. "Why do you think Earl wasn't in this holdup, Mr. Moran?"

"I have two or three reasons. What Murphy and Hall told you has no weight. In the first place they are liars; in the second place they were caught with the goods and had to tell you a story that would insure your silence. What other thing would have had so much weight with you as your brother's safety?"

"Yes, but—he had been with them for a week before the robbery."

"Then why didn't he come back here with them?"

"They said it was because he—he had

shot that poor boy and had run away to escape arrest."

"Legally they all shot Bill. All of them were firing. How can they tell your brother did it, granting for the moment he was there?"

"I don't know, but they said so."

"They all made their get-away safely except the man in the flivver. Why should Earl confess guilt by running away when he wasn't suspected?"

And again she said: "I don't know." Then added: "But he did run away. He didn't come back."

"This isn't the first time he has gone from home and stayed, is it?"

"No, this is the fourth time."

"Was it usually when things were breaking in a way he didn't like that he indulged in his wanderings?"

"Yes."

"Good. We'll suppose that Earl had got wind of what was afoot. Perhaps he had been approached to go in with the others on this robbery. He might even for a day or two have thought he would. But in the end he found he couldn't do it. He is wild, say, but not a criminal. He had become involved with these men. He was afraid of their influence over him, and the pressure was strong because since they had told him of their plans they had to get him in for their own safety. So he lights out, we'll say—runs away—*the day before the robbery.*"

"If we knew that," she cried. "But we don't."

"But we do. At least we have good reason to think so. The police discovered, after the body was found in the garage, that the robbers had rented the garage for a month, and the lower floor of the house on that lot. The people who own the house remember that one of the men, a young fellow whose description is like that of your brother, left early on the morning of the tenth with his suit case. The man was watering his lawn when he saw this young chap slipping out. The police have found that he picked up a taxi at a stand two blocks from there and was taken to the station. It is believed he bought a ticket for Kansas City. If he did, and if he used that ticket, he could not have been in the robbery."

"Oh, if that's only true," the girl sobbed.

"One more point. I saw the robbers at close quarters. I don't think I would recognize them all again. But if one had been a boy like Earl I would have noticed it. He wasn't there, or I'm much mistaken."

"Are you saying that to comfort me?" she begged.

"I'm saying it because it's true."

"I'd be so happy if I could believe that."

"Believe it, then. I've a hunch that's just the way it was. Either your brother got cold feet at the last minute and ran away, or else—and this seems to me more likely—he was so young they didn't let him in on their real plans till they were all worked out. When they told him he was shocked, but he had trailed with them too far.

"Perhaps it came to a show-down. Hall and the others didn't just say so, but Earl read their minds and was frightened. He knew that if he didn't go in they wouldn't leave him alive to testify against them later. So he ran away. Maybe he left a note saying he would keep his mouth shut and stay hid for a while. Anyhow, they likely talked the thing over and decided to go ahead with the job."

"Earl isn't a criminal, Mr. Moran," she burst out. "He's not like these men. If you knew him—just a wild boy, but the kind you'd like. So dear, and so good."

"This may be the jolt that will save him. These fellows got hold of him and flattered him. Now he sees what they are really like he will very likely steady down."

"If he really isn't in it; if they don't send him to prison."

"I don't think they will. He may be innocent, and yet a valuable witness. We must try to find him."

He changed the subject. "What about the others who were in it with Hall and Murphy? I think you said that they are in town."

"Of course, I don't *know* that these other two were in the holdup. These other two men—I think one is named Lynch and the other they called Tige—used to be with them all the time before the robbery, when

they were here in Petrolia. They would get up in the room Murphy had and have long talks, all of them speaking very low."

"Was Earl with them?"

"No, he had a job. But he'd be with them in the evenings. They were noisier then, though, and didn't stay at home."

"Can you describe these men to me—this Lynch and this Tige?"

"Lynch is short—and plump; that is, fat in a rolypoly way—and he always used to wear a hard felt hat, the kind they call a derby. But he doesn't now, for I saw him two days ago downtown. He had on a corduroy suit, and a broad soft gray hat like the oil men wear—only his are new and theirs are old and very much wrinkled and dusty."

"Anything more?"

"No, except that he talks a good deal and is quite polite."

"Good. And the other, the one they call Tige?"

"He's dark and lean, and his two front upper teeth are prominent. He's sort of slouchy in his dress. Oh, yes, and he chews tobacco. That's all I can think of about him."

"It's a good deal. By the way, about how old are they?"

"Lynch must be close to forty. He has a bald spot on the crown of his head. Tige is younger. Maybe he is twenty-five."

"Have you seen him in town since the robbery?"

"No."

"If you remember anything else about them will you tell me later? And don't ever speak to me while we are alone if there is a chance you may be seen. If they should suspect you actively you would be in constant danger. You'll be watched. So be very careful."

"Yes," the girl promised dutifully. She had accepted his leadership, and no longer questioned it.

"They will quiz you about me probably. Stick to the attitude that I'm just a chance stranger of no importance in the situation."

"Yes," she said again; and then, just before she left, she broke out impulsively: "But you don't know how much better I feel. It's as though I had some one to lean on now. I'm not afraid—not nearly so much."

"That's right." He nodded cheerfully. "Now you'd better get home."

He noticed as she went that her step no longer dragged.

CHAPTER XIV.

PETER GRINS.

IT occurred to Peter, and not only by way of fleeting thought, that he had better share with Carey what he had discovered in regard to the express shipment bandits. His knowledge was too valuable to be confined to the brain of a man who might at any time be "bumped off," as Skate Hall would phrase it. Peter did not want to talk with the banker over the telephone. Operators have been known to talk, without meaning any harm in the world. Therefore he decided to run down to Hilltown on the interurban.

He looked up Jim Dunn first.

"Want to go down to Hilltown with me?" he asked. "We'll come back in the evening. My treat."

"Why, I don't mind if I do," the tanned ex-puncher said.

Peter was careful to be early at the interurban station. He was the first passenger on board after the door was opened, and he took one of the rear seats. Jim sat down beside him.

"What's the big idea in squeezing past those ladies who wanted to get in?" the cowboy asked. "Afraid you weren't going to get a seat?"

"Afraid I wasn't going to get the one I wanted. I'll explain later—perhaps." He was not ready yet to tell Dunn that he would not have felt quite comfortable sitting in front of a man who had an ardent desire, one controlled only by the necessities of time and place, to shoot him through the back.

For out of the tail of his eye Peter had observed, trailing him to the station and later at the waiting room window buying a ticket, a dark, lank, slouchy man, with two prominent front teeth. He would have been willing to bet that his associates called

this man Tige. Evidently the fellow's business for the day was to shadow him. The bandits were checking up information as to his habits and associates. They wanted to know where he went and with whom he talked.

It cannot be said for Peter that he enjoyed his situation. This was as bad as waiting for the zero hour. It was worse, for his enemies could choose time, place, and conditions. All the advantage of ambush and surprise lay with them.

He had an imagination, and whenever he had wakened in the night there had jumped before him a picture of Peter Moran passing a dark alley or under an arc light or down a hall, and suddenly crumpling up with a bullet through head or heart or spine; and each time the vision had brought with it a cold collapse of the stomach muscles. In the daytime it was better, but even in the sunshine he could find no enjoyment in the certainty that he was doomed for death, at least if these villains could make good their intent.

Peter took Dunn measurably into his confidence. "I'm in a hole, Jim," he explained. "That fellow two seats in front of us, the one sitting on the outside, is keeping tabs on me. Now, I can't tell you the story yet, because it's not my secret. But I'll say this much: I didn't bring you along just for your company. You can help me if you want to. I'll tell you frankly it may be dangerous. If you'd rather drop out of this thing I'll not criticize you. The car hasn't started yet. You can step off."

Dunn grinned. "An' me cravin' excitement like a range cow does salt. Oh, boy, I'm buyin' a stack of these danger chips right now an' sittin' in. What's the limit in this game?"

"The stakes are high and the limit is the sky," Peter answered gravely.

"Meanin' just what?"

"Meaning that I may be murdered within twenty-four hours. I can't tell you more than that."

The cowboy flung one startled look at him. Peter looked entirely serious. "Murdered? Say, boy, you kiddin' me?"

He half expected Peter to smile, to admit that this was some kind of joke. But no smile appeared. The steady eyes denied any humorous intent.

"I mean just exactly what I've said. There will probably be an attempt on my life to-day—if not to-day, then to-morrow."

The cow-puncher felt a lift of the spirits. This was what he had been looking for. This was high adventure sure enough. "I'm with you, boy, till the cows come home. What you want me to do?"

"I'd like you to go to the First National Bank and ask for President Carey. Insist on seeing him. If necessary, write my name on a card and send it to him in a sealed envelope. Tell him I must see him at once if possible. Ask him to get into a taxi—not into his own car, because I don't want it known who I am meeting—and to come to the corner of Thirteenth and Cheyenne Streets. You come with him."

"Sure. Anything else?"

"Notice this fellow in front of us. Every once in awhile he turns his head to make sure I don't get off when the car stops. Size him up so you will know him again."

At the first stop in Hilltown, Peter said to Dunn: "See you later." He waited till the car was just starting, then ran out to the platform and dropped to the ground.

A moment later another man appeared on the platform and descended hurriedly—so hurriedly that the momentum of the moving car sent him rolling in the dust. The man jumped up and looked around swiftly. His glance came to a halt at sight of Peter, standing a few yards away and smiling at him. He scowled, feeling no doubt rather sheepish. He had expected to see the man he was sleuthing on the run.

Peter said with mock politeness: "Hope you didn't hurt yourself. It's rather a good idea to get off before the car starts, don't you think?" He had waited to get another good look at the man standing.

The fellow glared at him savagely, but did not commit his opinion to words. Tige was not strong on repartee. His forte was action.

Briskly Peter stepped up the street. He hailed a trolley car and boarded it. Tige chased it and pulled himself on. He puffed

from his run. Moran grinned. His grin expressed solicitude maliciously.

Twenty minutes later Peter descended from the car followed by his shadow. He moved up the street as though headed for an immediate goal. Without looking back he knew that he was being followed once more. He heard behind him the slap of feet on the cement walk.

Suddenly Peter turned and retraced his steps, very slowly. Impishly he grinned as he met the other. Ten yards away he swung round quickly. Tige was turning at the same moment. Again Peter's quizzical smile mocked him as they passed. The man glared angrily. He did not enjoy being made a fool of, but his instructions did not cover this point. It was a possibility that had not been foreseen.

Peter hailed a taxi, jumped in, and said to the driver: "Lake Park." He looked through the rear window and saw that Tige was jumping into a yellow cab. The meter clock ticked up fifty cents, and Peter gave a second direction. "Back to where you picked me up."

He paid his bill and got out. When Tige left his cab he saw Peter leaning against a lamp post smoking a cigarette.

"Have a pleasant trip?" Peter asked blithely.

The outlaw glared at him sulkily. What was he to do or say? If it had been in a lonely spot, after dark—well, he would have known how to handle this situation. But in broad daylight, in the heart of a busy city, he dared not resort to gun play.

Peter put his hands in his pockets, pleasantly at peace with the world, to all appearances at any rate. The bandit could only stand and glare at him fifty feet away. Tige felt like a fool. He did not enjoy being "made a monkey of," as he expressed it later to his companions. Awkwardly he waited, not knowing what else to do.

When the moment for action came he was caught unprepared, through no fault of his own. A taxi rounded the corner and stopped in front of Peter. Inside it were two men and a woman. Peter opened the door and stepped in, and at once the machine started moving.

Instantly Tige wakened to action. He looked around hurriedly for another cab. None was in sight. He turned and began to run after the car. Presently he stopped. It was drawing away from him.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

SAVING SEA

THIS head of mine is splittin'
  Because of my drunken spree,
So I'll be treadin' th' slant decks
  An' I'll be knowin' th' sea;
Far from th' crowds an' clamor,
  Away from a wanton's lies,
I shall be cleansed by th' salt-spray
  That dances across th' skies.

Cities are not for sailors,
  Who are but simple folk,
In spite of their loud-mouthed cursin',
  In spite of each dirty joke.
An' now that my coin is squandered,
  Kicked out of a noisome den,
I turn to th' winds an' th' waters
  To make me a man again.

Edgar Daniel Kramer.

The Party Line

By GORDON STILES

AS if he sensed that something exciting was in the air, Jed Cooley dropped the hundred-pound bag of cracked corn which he was lifting onto a hand truck and swung about even before the flivver of Nat Bennett came to a screeching stop and its owner flung himself out upon the platform, pop-eyed and panting, almost as though he himself had furnished the motive power that had brought him there. Nat's wife leaned forward from her seat in the car, white of face.

"Murder!" croaked Bennett, when he could articulate.

"What?" cried Cooley. "Where? Who's murdered?"

"Horace Radley!" Words came readily enough now. "Head's all stove in! Me'n' Susan jest found him. Stopped t' see him on some business, drivin' in, an' seen his foot stickin' outa the door! 'Twas half open an' he's layin' there all over blood! He's dead! Felt of him an' he was cold's a stone! Gosh!"

Nat shuddered; his wife made queer, squeaking efforts to add her bit to Nat's story. But these were lost on Jed.

That individual drew himself up to his full height of six feet one. Over him there settled a swift sense of responsibility—responsibility and authority. This was accompanied by a thrill that tore at the roots of his hair.

For Jed Cooley was the legally constituted chief of police appointed under the village charter of Spring River, Connecticut. And now, he found himself confronted by his first important case.

For fourteen years Jed had waited for something with more serious aspects than normally attend the stealing of apples by boys or the depredations occasionally committed by city visitors who were too ignorant to know that country fields and orchards are really the property of somebody.

While Jed's hay and grain business supplied the bulk of his income, he had yearned

for an opportunity to qualify as an efficient police officer as well as a shrewd merchant. His investigations in the realm of capital crimes had been purely theoretical, and dealt largely with newspaper accounts of such matters.

For years, whenever a great crime story broke, Jed had been wont to set down his own conclusions as each installment appeared, then watch to see how near he came to the ultimate solution. To his credit were a score of these somewhat empty triumphs.

Now, he had his opportunity. With a self control that astonished himself, he entered upon his official investigation.

" Back up, Nat," he said. " Don't go so fast. I want to get this business straight. What time was it you found Radley?"

" 'Bout twenty minutes ago—mebbe half an hour.".

" That'd make it quarter past nine," said Jed, glancing at his watch. " Did you see anything he might 'a' been hit with?"

" No. Didn't see nothin' but him. Soon's I seen he was done for, I hustled right in here to you. Hain't told nobody else. Figgered 'twas up t' me t' notify you fust."

" That's right. You'd better park Susan somewhere an' drive me right out there."

" Awright," returned Nat and engaged himself in the no easy task of persuading Susan that she should be " parked " anywhere. But when he declared: " It's th' law. I gotta do what Jed says," the lady suffered herself to be escorted to the home of a cousin where she consoled herself by plunging into a hysterical report of the discovery her husband had made.

The flivver bearing Nat and Jed was hardly out of sight when as many of Spring River's nine hundred inhabitants as could fight their way into the house, were among her audience. Then Susan was glad she had been parked.

II.

" Who'd you s'pose could 'a' done it?" Nat asked as the car got under way.

With professional instinct, Jed replied: " Can't tell anything about it until I've looked things over."

" Course not," the other agreed. " 'Tain't f'r me t' say, I reckon, but I'd be willin' t' bet 'twas that Polak Horace fired las' week."

" Mike Gerowski. I know Mike pretty well. Don't seem to me the kinda feller who'd do a thing like that. Worst I ever knew him to do was get drunk. That's what Horace fired him for, wasn't it?"

" Yeah! He'd been snooted twice in a month, Horace said. Ya gotta look out f'r them foreign fellers. They git nasty easy."

At the Radley place Jed gathered little that Nat had not told him or that he had not known before. The body of the murdered farmer lay as had been described, the head crushed by a blow evidently delivered from behind as the victim entered his door.

The dead man's pockets had been rifled and there was evidence of a hasty inspection of a desk—drawers open and the floor littered with papers.

At the end of fifteen minutes, Jed telephoned the detective bureau at Westhall, the county seat, twenty miles distant. He would remain on guard, he said, until the officers arrived. Within the hour, they were on the ground—Detectives Crotty and Klein, hard boiled and cynical, patronizing in their attitude toward Chief Cooley.

In preparation for their arrival, Jed had set down the known facts on a sheet of paper. From this they entered the salient points in their own memorandum books.

Horace Radley, widower, sixty-two, found murdered in his own house. Robbery obviously the motive.

Radley had been to Westhall the previous day, had collected upward of four thousand dollars cash in payment for his tobacco crop which he had held for a better market than obtained when most of his neighbors sold theirs. He had taken the four ten train from Westhall, reaching Spring River at four fifty, too late to deposit his money in the Spring River Savings Bank. He had driven home—six miles—in his buggy which he had left in the village when he departed for the county seat.

On reaching home, he had put the horse in the barn before going into the house. Apparently, the murderer had concealed himself around the corner of the porch, and had struck his victim from behind as the latter was unlocking the door.

There was evidence of the body having been dragged over the threshold. The weapon used was a blood-stained sledge hammer taken from the wagon shed.

Three days earlier, the deceased had discharged a Pole, one Mike Gerowski, for drinking. While Radley was unpopular with his neighbors, because of his sharpness in business dealings, he was not known to have any enemy sufficiently bitter to seek his life.

That was the case as recorded by Messrs. Crotty and Klein.

To them, the matter presented little difficulty. To Jed Cooley they made that clear.

"All that's gotta be done is round up this Polak," Crotty declared. "It's a dead open an' shut. If you'll go back to town an' see what you can dig up about him there, we'll work the farms an' railroad stations. Oughta be easy to pick him up. We'll call you on the telephone at three o'clock an' swap notes."

"I ain't so sure that Polak did it," Jed ventured. "He wa'n't a bad kind, from all I ever saw."

"Killers ain't usually bad ones in other ways," Crotty assured him. "Let's get on the job."

Jed and Nat drove back to Spring River to find Mrs. Bennett holding court and to be assailed by a thousand questions. Klein remained on guard at the Radley farm until the coroner and undertaker should arrive from Westhall; Crotty took up the trail of Mike Gerowski.

III.

It required but a short investigation to convince Jed Cooley that Mike Gerowski had not been in the village since his discharge by Radley. Perhaps that was just as well, since Jed found himself beset on all sides by eager seekers after information.

He tried to think of some other angle of the case which he might cover and still be on hand when the county detective should call him at three o'clock. Five hours to go. He fretted under the imposed inactivity.

In Chadwick's meat market, Jed came upon Joe Grimsey paying a long standing bill. He acknowledged Grimsey's salutation by a curt nod; the two men were not friends. A few years back Jed had arrested Grimsey on suspicion of having stolen a neighbor's chickens, and while everybody was certain that Joe was the thief, nothing could be proved against him. Ever since that time, Grimsey had lost no opportunity of throwing the episode up to Jed. The present was no exception.

Grimsey leered into the chief's face and exclaimed: "Wal, wal! What you doin' here, Jed? Why ain't you sleuthin' f'r the feller 't kilt Radley? Or maybe you've caught him a'ready?"

"None o' your damn business what I'm doin'," Jed replied tartly, and watched the departure of the other with an angry frown. "Damn skunk!" he muttered under his breath.

Chadwick laughed. "Him an' you don't gee much, Jed," he remarked. "I was glad enough to see him though. Owed me thirty-two dollars since Lord knows when. Paid it to-day. West must o' paid him for fixin' over his office."

Ralph West had come to Spring River two years before and opened an agency for a new tractor. His efforts among the farmers in the surrounding countryside had not borne much fruit, but he had stuck doggedly to his purpose and, as Chadwick's remark indicated, had even gone to the expense of renovating his office. Joe Grimsey, by trade a carpenter, had made the alterations.

Joe was an excellent workman when he chose to extend himself. But that was seldom. He was a bachelor, sour and taciturn by nature, inclined to be what the village called "shiftless."

He lived alone in a cottage at the north end of town, cooked his own meals, loafed, drank, fished a little and was generally looked upon for what he was—a worthless member. He was so unreliable that most people employed outsiders to do their carpenter work, but West appeared to get on all right with Grimsey and had been heard to express his satisfaction with the man.

Chief Cooley, standing there in the market, staring at the back of Joe Grimsey, retreating down the street, suddenly felt

himself seized by a hunch or a brain wave or whatever one chooses to call it. Whatever it was, it carried a mighty curiosity as to the actions of Joe Grimsey, although, at the moment, Jed could not have said exactly why.

Perhaps it was inspired by his dislike of Joe, perhaps not. It might have been merely a craving for action. Anyway, Jed went out and took up the trail of the other man.

This was ridiculously easy. From the post office steps, Jed could command an unobstructed view of all of the business and much of the residential section of Spring River. Also, Joe moved leisurely.

His next port of call was the office of Harry Keaton, justice of the peace and tax collector. The folded bit of paper in Grimsey's fingers, as he emerged, told Jed that the taxes on Joe's cottage had been paid.

There was another stop—at Pete Hewitt's. Pete was a genial soul who, everybody knew, kept a healthy stock of liquor and could be induced to part with portions of his supply. The oblong parcel which Grimsey bore away was just the proper size to contain two bottles of apple jack. Jed noticed this, also that Grimsey's face was set toward home.

Nat Bennett's flivver was easing along the street. Impulsively, Jed hailed it.

"Say, Nat," he said. "Want to run me out to Bill Gibson's, on your way home?"

"Sure," returned Nat. "Gotta pick up th' ol' woman 's I go along."

He looked curiously at Jed. They had passed Gibson's twice that day, once on the way to Radley's and again as they returned. He wondered why Jed wanted to go there now. He saw the question in the other's eyes.

"Oh, this ain't got anything to do with the ecase," he offered. "I meant to 'a' stopped there when we came back. Gotta see Bil."

The car rattled away.

Between Joe Grimsey's cottage on the edge of the town, and the Radley farm, there was only one dwelling, that of Bill Gibson. Jed dropped off the running board of Bennett's car, sought out Gibson, who was filing a saw in the woodshed. The two men greeted one another, Gibson wondering what could have brought Jed to the house.

"Caught your man, Jed?" he inquired.

"Not yet. Say, Bill, did you notice anybody goin' past your place yesterday afternoon?"

Bill thought a moment. "Nobody 'ceptin' Joe Grimsey," he said.

"H'm!" grunted Jed, wondering if Gibson could even guess at the satisfaction the answer gave him. "What time was that, Bill?"

"'Bout two o'clock, I should say."

"See him come back?"

"Nope. But I was milkin' an' he might easy 'a' gone by without me seein' him."

"Any idea where he was headed for?"

"Nope." Bill started suddenly. "You don't think Joe—you don't think he—"

"Don't think nothin'," Jed cut in. "Just kind of inquirin' round, that's all."

He departed abruptly and made his way slowly back over the road toward the village.

"Dog-gone!" he muttered to himself. "Dog-gone if it ain't queer. Joe pays Chadwick out of a new fifty-dollar bill. Ain't likely West would have give a big bill like that. But the bank *does* pay out big bills for tobacco checks—new ones, too, most times. Cripes! Guess I'll drop in on Joe. He'll be madder'n a wet hen, too."

The chief felt the butt of the revolver that weighted his right hip pocket.

IV.

THE smoke from a freshly-kindled fire was rising from the chimney of Grimsey's house as Jed traversed the narrow path leading to the kitchen door. There was a slight delay before Joe opened the door to the chief's knock.

Grimsey's eyes flew swiftly to the other's face, then he smiled sourly. His tone was mocking as he said: "What's up now? Maybe you come to 'rest me f'r that Radley business."

"Think I had?" inquired Jed, quietly.

"I wouldn't put it apast ya—not after that smart aleck trick you played on me awhile back. Wal—what kin I do f'r ya, Mr. Detecertive?"

Jed held his temper. "I was just tryin' to find out if anybody'd been seen goin' out Radley's way yesterday. You see anybody, Grimsey?"

"I was out that way myself. Now whatta ya think o' that?"

"See anybody else?"

"No, I didn't. S'pose you'll wanta know what was doin' so 'll beat ya to it. I went out f'r some hickory nuts—them trees down by Chadwick's piece."

"H'm. Get any?"

"'Bout a peck. Thar they be." Joe indicated a wooden bucket almost full of nuts.

Jed dipped his hand in and let the nuts trickle back into the bucket.

"Good big ones," he commented. "Guess I'll be goin' along." He rose.

"Ain't goin' t' pinch me, then?" Grimsey sneered.

"Not just now," returned Jed, shortly, and went out.

V.

STRAIGHT to his store Jed hastened. There, in the privacy of a back room, he drew from his pocket two hickory nuts; these he cracked with a hammer against the side of a vise.

Holding the shattered bits in the palm of his hand, he carried them to the light, where he examined the fragments carefully, tasted one, and at the end he drew in his breath sharply.

"Gosh-a'mighty!" he exclaimed. "Why, the danged old liar! Now, why the devil —if he—by cripes! Maybe I ain't so far off, at that! By gosh!"

He went to the front of the store and rang up the Westhall National Bank. When he had the cashier on the wire, he said: "This is Chief Cooley of Spring River talking. You know about the murder. Well, can you tell me what shape that money was in that was paid to Radley yesterday?"

"I paid him myself," the cashier replied. "I can't remember exactly, but it was mostly in hundreds, fifties, and twenties."

"New or old money?"

"Some of each. I can't say just how much."

"All right. Much obliged." Jed hung up, set himself to think.

He had, he thought, the makings of a case against Joe Grimsey. In the first place, there was the new fifty dollar bill which had caught his eye in Chadwick's market. Perhaps, as Chadwick surmised, West had paid Joe for his work. Even so, fifty dollar bills were not common about Spring River. Then Joe had settled other bills, invested in liquor.

Beyond that was the fact that Bill Gibson had seen Joe going in the direction of Radley's. That move, of course, had been plausibly explained by Grimsey. But his very explanation had given Jed the most damning bit of evidence he held. At least, Jed thought so.

Because Jed had seen at once—as any other person who knew anything of the subject could have seen—that the nuts he had taken from the lot Joe claimed to have gathered yesterday were at least one and perhaps two years old.

The dryness of the shell, its brittleness, the way it cracked, the color of the kernel, the taste of the bit Jed had nibbled—no getting away from it. Joe Grimsey had lied, that was all.

Added to that was a feeling on the part of the chief that Grimsey was the murderer. To Jed's mind, the man was perfectly capable of the crime.

It was probable that he had not intended to kill his victim; rather he had intended to knock him out, so that he should not recognize his assailant. And Jed had an equally strong feeling that the suspected Pole had not committed the deed. No, sir, he thought, Mike wasn't that sort of a man. He might get drunk and all that, but there was nothing vicious about him.

In spite of all this, Jed hesitated to take a positive step. Nor was it necessary to do so at once. He knew that Grimsey believed he had brazened it out and that the man would not worry. Better wait until he heard from Crotty and Klein.

VI.

THE county detectives did not telephone; instead, Crotty came to the village. Klein,

he explained, was following Gerowski's trail which was so broad that he prophesied the farm hand would be in custody before night. He himself thought it might be as well to run in to see Chief Cooley rather than discuss matters over the wire. He supposed Mr. Cooley had not dug up anything which might bear on the case. In his opinion, the chase would end shortly with the arrest of Mike Gerowski.

Jed listened attentively to what the county sleuth had to say, but he was burning with eagerness to unfold his own special clew. Just as well to have Crotty's opinion on the subject.

Therefore, when an opening came, he imparted his suspicions to the other. He laid the evidence set down above before his erstwhile colleague and was gratified to note Crotty's growing interest.

When Jed had finished, Crotty said: "Well, let's look this guy over. Where've you got him?"

"I haven't got him anywhere. I suppose he's home—or round the town somewhere."

Crotty turned on Jed with scorn and anger written on his face. "Mean to say you ain't got this bird locked up!"

"Not yet." Jed tried to justify himself. "Thought I'd see what you thought about it."

"Chances are that he don't know no more about it than a baby. But this is a murder case, man! An' you can't pass up any bets. Pinch everybody! It's easier to turn 'em loose if they're right than to catch 'em if they're wrong. Come with me. We'll give this guy a chance to say what he was up to yesterday, an' why he pulled that phony stuff about the nuts on you. He'll come clean, or I'll know the reason why."

Looking at Crotty's red face and bull neck, Jed thought that Joe probably would "come clean." They stepped into Crotty's car, and a few minutes later drew up at Grimsey's house.

Crotty rapped smartly, followed it up by turning the knob, and pushing the door open. Grimsey was midway between table and door. Jed thought he caught a fleeting alarm in Grimsey's face at sight of the stranger, but it passed as swiftly as it came.

"Wal," drawled Joe impatiently. "What ya after now, Jed—you an' y'r friend?"

"Kinda thought—" began Jed.

But Crotty cut in: "My name's Crotty, of the county police. You won't mind running down to Chief Cooley's office for a few minutes, I suppose. Few questions, that's all."

"Sure. Sure," said Grimsey. "I'll be with you right away." He turned away toward an inner room.

But Crotty said quickly: "Don't bother about anything. There's your hat an' coat. Leave things just as they are. 'Twon't take long."

He watched Grimsey narrowly as the latter got into a blue reefer and donned the cap that lay with it on a chair. Once or twice Grimsey opened his mouth as if to speak. But he remained silent, his lips gradually tightening into a grim, sneering line.

They went out together, and when Grimsey made as if to lock the door Crotty did it for him and dropped the key into his own pocket.

VII.

In Jed Cooley's office at the rear of the feed store Grimsey dropped into a chair, folded his arms, and waited for whatever might be coming. It was clear that he was angry, but there was no sign of nervousness in his bearing.

Crotty opened up: "Understand now. You're not arrested. But in a case like this Radley business everybody's got to tell what they know, even if it don't amount to anything."

Grimsey cleared his throat, but said nothing.

Crotty began: "What were you doing between two and six o'clock yesterday afternoon?"

Grimsey spoke slowly, eying Jed contemptuously the while.

"I went out an' got me some hickory nuts. That was about half past two, I guess. Must 'a' got home round four o'clock, mebbe earlier. Sat around awhile, an' Ralph West called me up on the phone; wanted me t' come over t' his place. That

must 'a' been 'bout five o'clock. I went along there' an' West paid me some money he owed me. Had a coupla drinks with him an' went 'long home some time after six o'clock. That's all I can remember."

"That's good enough, if it checks up all right," said Crotty. "I'll just ring up West."

He stepped to the telephone; Jed supplied the number. For three minutes the detective waited.

"No answer," he reported, and hung up.

"Didn't think you would," grinned Joe sourly. "He's gone to Westhall to-day. Told me he was goin'. Won't be back till five o'clock."

"Did you meet anybody when you were on your way to West's yesterday?" inquired Crotty.

"Dunno. I guess so. But it was beginning to get dark an' rainin', so I can't say who I saw. Did notice, though, that Maria Ketcham had her nose against the winder. She don't never miss nothin'. Listens in on the party line to every call an' watches everything that goes on in the street. All she's got to do."

"H-m," said Crotty. "Your telephone on the same line as hers."

"Yep. So's West's. An' Chadwick's."

"Call up this Ketcham dame and get her over here, will you?" Crotty said to Jed.

Five minutes later Miss Ketcham arrived in a flutter.

"So you're the county detective," she began when Jed had introduced Crotty. "Ain't this murder terrible—"

"We asked you to come over," broke in Crotty, "because we thought you might help us. You see, we have to know what everybody was doing yesterday. Mr. Grimsey here says you might have seen him go past your house yesterday afternoon. Did you?"

"I surely did," Miss Ketcham returned promptly. "I just happened to be looking out the window—my house is right on the street, you know—and I saw him going past just before dark. I thought then that a man with a cold ought to take better care of himself than going out in the rain."

"How did you know he had a cold?"

Miss Ketchem turned red, hesitated.

"You see, it just so happened that I was going to call up Chadwick to order some meat, and—you see we are on a party line and ring the numbers ourselves when the party we want to get is on our line. And of course it's best to listen a minute to see if anybody else is using the wire, first. And I just happened to hear Mr. West call up Mr. Grimsey here, just happened to."

"Did you hear what they said?"

"Why, yes. It was just a word or two. You see—well—Mr. West just asked Mr. Grimsey to come over, and Mr. Grimsey said he had a bad cold, but he would. Then it wasn't but a few minutes when I saw Mr. Grimsey go by—a little after five o'clock, I think it was."

"I'm much obliged," said Crotty. "Thanks for comin' over, Miss Ketcham."

Crotty rose to open the door; the lady made a reluctant exit.

Grimsey sneered: "Satisfied now, Jed? That's twice you picked on me an' made a fool of yourself. You goin' good."

"Keep your mouth shut," said Crotty testily. "The chief's got his job to do, an' you're lucky you wasn't slung into the hoosegow in the first place. Anyway, what did you lie to him for about them nuts?"

Grimsey registered genuine surprise at this question. "Whad d'ye mean?"

Crotty explained. Jed chimed in: "I carried off a couple of those hickory nuts. You told me you got 'em yesterday, an' I found out by crackin' 'em that they was at least a year old. How do you account for that?"

"Easy, Mr. Smarty. I happened to dump a quart or so of old nuts on top o' them I got yesterday. Go on out an' git the bucket an' see f'r y'rself."

"Go ahead," said Crotty. "We'll wait here for you. Goin' to stay here until West comes back, anyhow, an' clean things up right."

Jed came back in half an hour. "He's right," he announced, and spilled a handful of nuts on the table. "Most of 'em was this year's crop, all right."

And when Ralph West could be reached he told a story that checked perfectly with that of Grimsey. He had asked Joe to come

over, paid him ninety dollars which included a fifty dollar bill. Joe had remained until after six o'clock and they had had two drinks.

The discomfiture of Mr. Cooley was equaled only by the sardonic triumph of Mr. Grimsey.

What made it worse, Grimsey went about the town telling the story with embellishments of his own, so that Jed came in for some pretty severe kidding.

The climax was capped when Mike Gerowski was picked up three days later at the home of a relative on the east side of New York. Brought back to Westhall by Messrs. Crotty and Klein, he was thrown into a cell.

Next day the announcement came that Mike had confessed, but had refused to tell what he had done with the money. Some two hundred dollars were all the authorities found on him when he was arrested.

VIII.

Mrs. Tukey could not read or write, but she could wash and scrub floors and clean windows. Such brains as she possessed functioned slowly, and not always satisfactorily, but her mental equipment sufficed to support three small children as well as a worthless husband.

Mrs. Tukey was the village charwoman. And because she was good at her work, her various employers forgave her lack of dependability.

Thus, when Mrs. Tukey dropped in most casually and began to wash the windows of Chief Cooley's office, he paid little attention to her. It was a comfort to know that here, at least, was one person who would not offer any jibes in connection with the Radley case.

While she was polishing the window beside Jed's old desk, Mrs. Tukey remarked, "That was a awful thing—Mr. Radley's bein' kilt, wasn't it?"

"Yuh," grunted Jed, wincing inwardly.

"An' Mr. Grimsey didn't have nothin' t' do with it, hey?"

"No," Jed returned, shortly and gruffly.

Mrs. Tukey scrubbed in silence for a moment. Then, "I heard 'em talkin' about him. He's a mean old critter, but I s'pose he couldn't be hung jes' f'r that. He was over t' Mr. West's all the time, hey?"

"Says he was," returned Jed, grudgingly.

"I knew he'd been there," went on Mrs. Tukey, innocently. "'Cuz I was over there to clean early next mornin' an' I seen his coat an' hat—"

"You saw what!" cried Jed, sitting up with a jump.

"Why—Mr. Grimsey's coat an' hat. I was lookin' f'r mop rags in the closet. Mr. West wa'n't up yet. An' I seen Mr. Grimsey's coat an' hat—that ol' heavy overcoat he's worn f'r years an' that nasty ol' derby. They was chucked down in the bottom o' th' closet. So y'see I knew he'd been there." She smiled triumphantly.

Jed Cooley leaned back in his chair and stared at the woman.

The following morning Chief Cooley went to Westhall. He carefully avoided the detective bureau, with the attendant possibilities of running into Crotty or Klein. But he did visit the county jail.

The jailer was his friend, and he had no trouble in gaining permission to see Mike Gerowski. When he emerged, after a half hour's talk with the prisoner, one would have said that Jed Cooley had dropped ten years back there within the grim walls.

And there was in the chief's eye, in the set of his lips, something that indicated a serious purpose.

Back in Spring River, the old man shut himself in his tiny office, lay back in his chair, and thought, and thought, and thought. An hour, two hours, passed. Then the frown between Jed's eyes relaxed a little. He dug a time-table out of a drawer.

"I'll get up an' catch the six nine," he muttered.

Next day the station master was telling the group that hung about the baggage room, "Yeh. Jed's gone to th' big city, t' order his spring goods. Guess he's got over his mad, because when I started to ride him he says, 'Save y'r thunder, Clem. As a detective I'm a damn good feed merchant. An' I'm goin' t' put in a line o'

garden seeds that'll knock y'r eye out.' I couldn't git a rise outa him no how."

So rapidly was Jed's business in New York transacted that he managed to catch a late afternoon train back to Spring River. He was accompanied by a thickset individual, who for some strange reason alighted independently and followed along a few paces behind the chief as the latter made his way home. It was the supper hour for Spring River, and the street was deserted.

Just inside his own front door, Jed waited until he heard the brisk footsteps of the other on the porch. Then he opened the door quickly and admitted the stranger.

"Guess nobody saw you," he remarked, as he snapped out the front hall light. He ushered the visitor into the dining room, introduced him to Mrs. Cooley as Mr. Burleigh, after which there was a private session between husband and wife.

Jed hurried through his supper, left the house, and reached the post office just as Spring River was dropping in for the evening mail. Ralph West was among the number. He greeted Jed with, "Hear you been to the big town?"

"Just for a day," replied Jed. "Ordered my spring seed." He hurried out. West remarked to the postmaster, "Jed's recovering, I see." The official grinned. "Goin' to lodge to-night?" he asked.

West said, "Sure thing. On my way now."

IX.

From the post office Chief Cooley made his way to the home of Ralph West. According to the custom of Spring River, the back door was unlocked. Jed had counted on this.

Now he opened the door and walked boldly in, drawing a small flashlight from his pocket as he did so. He remained inside for perhaps fifteen minutes; when he emerged something akin to a chuckle of satisfaction escaped his lips.

In quick succession, then, he made three calls. The first was at the combined home and office of Harry Keaton, justice of the peace. There he said, "Keep your office open, Harry. Have some business for you inside an hour." Harry promised, wondering. Jed hurried away.

At the home of Walter Preston, garage owner, he caught that individual in the act of departing for the lodge whither Ralph West had signified his intention of going.

"I got to swear you in as a deputy, Walt," Jed told him. "Get your gun an' go over to Harry Keaton's office. See you there later. No time t' explain now."

Next Jed called at Chadwick's. "Need your help, Chad," he said. "Got t' swear you in as a deputy. Got a gun, ain't you?"

"Sure," Chadwick admitted. "But what the Sam Hill—"

"Talk about it later. Get out your car an' drive it over to my place."

"All right," agreed Chadwick.

Jed hastened to his own house, and quickly escorted his guest down the street to Harry Keaton's. Preston was already there. Jed merely introduced Mr. Burleigh, who, he said, would explain matters, then returned home just as Chadwick drove up. To the butcher he spoke rapidly as the car rolled off toward the edge of the village.

Joe Grimsey opened the door to find an ugly looking revolver thrust hard against his chest! Behind the gun the gray eyes of Jed Cooley gleamed coldly in the lamplight. At Jed's elbow stood Chadwick!

"Stick 'em up, Grimsey! High!" snapped Jed. "See if he's got a gun, Chad."

Grimsey opened his mouth. Jed poked the gun harder against his ribs.

"Shut up!" he commanded. "You can talk later. You're under arrest for murder!"

A second later a pair of handcuffs snapped on Grimsey's wrists, and he was escorted urgently to the waiting car. At Keaton's the prisoner was thrust into the room where the justice, Preston, and Burleigh sat.

"You watch him, Walt, an' plug him if he makes a funny move. Chad an' I'll go get the other one now."

To the doorkeeper at the hall where the lodge meeting was in progress Jed said, "Tell Mr. West there's a telegram here for him."

West came slowly out, bareheaded, looking puzzled. Instantly Jed's big gun covered him. "No tricks, Mr. West!" he said. "Hands up! Quick an' high! That's it! Keep 'em there. Chad!"

Gingerly Chadwick extracted a blunt automatic from the right hip pocket of Mr. West. A second pair of handcuffs were produced, and five minutes afterward the party at the office of Harry Keaton was complete.

If West's jaw dropped when he saw Grimsey sitting there it was nothing to the astonishment he registered at the sight of Burleigh.

"So, Mr. West, you recognize me," said the stranger. "The wind has changed a bit since we met last. It was Mr. North then. And the time before that it was Marsh—or was it Fenton? I can't keep track of 'em all."

"All right, Burleigh," snapped West. "What of it? What I'd like to know is, where these other gentlemen figure in it. What's the big idea?"

"The big idea," said Jed, "is that you an' Joe Grimsey are pinched for the murder of Horace Radley."

"Cuckoo again!" sneered West. "And how do you dope that out, Mr. *Constabule?*"

"I'll tell you just about what happened," began Jed. His voice steadied under the influence of his high moment. That was at hand. He continued, "You ain't no more Ralph West than I am. God knows what your real name is. But you've done time in Chicago and Philadelphia and Sing Sing. They got it all at headquarters in New York, as Mr. Burleigh will tell these gentlemen. Got some good pictures of you, too.

"Your last job was a bank holdup in Richmond. They got two of your pals, but not you. You come up here to lay low for awhile. That dame you had wasn't your wife an' she got cold feet an' walked out on you. Then, while you was markin' time, sort of, you see a swell chance to do in Horace Radley and pick up some easy money on the side.

"You're the best alibi man in the game, so Burleigh tells me, an' you planned the whole thing out fine. Told Grimsey just what to do, even give him the gloves he wore so's not to leave finger-prints behind. Joe made the mistake o' burnin' them in his stove an' I sifted the two buttons outa his ash heap yesterday afternoon when he was down to your place drinkin'.

"So you send Grimsey off to knock Radley on the head. Then, about the time Radley would be gettin' to his house, you sneak up to Joe's house an' ring your own number on the party line. You're figgerin' that some one might listen in an' o' course Maria Ketcham does. On the wire, you say to Joe that you want him to come over. Then you answer as if you was him. Change your voice an' say you got a cold. Anybody listenin' would think it was Joe answerin' you. So that's all right.

"Then you put on Grimsey's ol' coat an' hat, turn up the collar an' go down the street to your house. Pretty nigh dark, and rainin'. Anybody'd take you for Joe like Miss Ketcham did. Trouble was, you didn't dare take a chance o' goin' back to Joe's with the things that night an' you didn't figger on Mrs. Tukey findin' them duds in the mop closet so early next mornin'. An' you didn't figger that one o' the loose buttons on that coat o' Grimsey's might come off. I found it in that same closet to-night.

"Then, when Mike Gerowski tells me, on top of the rest, that he confessed only because they was beatin' him one minute an' promisin' to go easy on him if he'd say he did it, the next, well—I got it worked out so's it holds water, I figger. What you two skunks got to say now?"

"A sweet story," began West. But Grimsey interrupted him. "You dirty crook! You got me into this!"

But Burleigh clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Save that for later," he advised. To the others he said: "Call up the county bureau and have them send over a car with a proper guard for these chaps. We'll wait here for them. And tell 'em they'd better turn that Polak loose if they know what's good for 'em."

THE END

The Print of a French Heel

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Hole in the Wall," "West of Broadway," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PREVIOUS PARTS

AMON PETERSON, an old loan shark of Miltville, who has lived alone since his wife died, and his son and daughter ran away, is shot and mortally wounded. With his dying breath he phones that Bill Phillips shot him, though the telephone operator refuses to swear that she heard "Bill Phillips." Henry Finch, Peterson's lawyer, says that Bill was the chief beneficiary of the miser's will; but no trace of it or any securities can be found anywhere. Meanwhile, Andrews, State detective in charge of the case, has found Peterson's clothes and two bottles of champagne in the barn, a handkerchief in the murder room, and the heelprint of Ruth Peterson in the hallway near it. Ruth, who is the miser's daughter, claims she was in New York on the murder night. Bill Phillips is caught, but escapes from the county jail under circumstances suggesting connivance of the authorities. The same night Andrews is knocked out and tied up while at the Peterson house, and the handkerchief, Ruth Peterson's incriminating shoe, and the champagne are taken from the detective's hotel room. Walter Otis, Bill's lawyer, comes to see Andrews, tells him that he wants to bring the escaped prisoner to the murder house that night, and shows Andrews an order from the State chief of detectives instructing him to do whatever Otis demanded. However, this first order of Otis's seems so preposterous that Andy immediately puts in a long distance telephone call to his chief to check up.

CHAPTER XIX (*Continued*).

ANDREWS ARRESTS A LADY.

IN five minutes the chief came on the wire, and Andrews lodged his protest.

"Did you give Walter Otis a note for me to do everything?" he asked.

"That's right, Andrews."

"Well, I wonder if you knew what he proposed to ask me?"

"I don't want to know."

"But he wants me to be remiss."

"Be remiss."

"But, chief—"

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 24.

"Listen, Andrews, Mr. Otis unofficially is in charge of this case, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"If he tells you to jump into the river, do it."

"But don't you think he should take me into his confidence?"

"That's up to him. If he should tell you to do something that I could not countenance if it were brought officially to my attention, I trust you will see that it isn't brought to my attention. Get me?"

"I get you," said the detective disgustedly. He heard the click of the chief hanging up his telephone, and he left the booth wiping his brow. However, the situation was clearer. He had lodged his protest, discovered that the chief was willing to vouch for Otis, and probably knew what Otis wanted, but could not admit it.

That meant to Andrews that the arrest of Phillips had been an error, and that the authorities had winked at his escape; they wanted him at large for some purpose not yet known to the officer in charge, and undoubtedly had some good reason for it. Well, he had a hunch all along that Phillips was innocent.

There was the local police to be considered, however. Easton and his half dozen policemen knew Phillips; had known him from boyhood. If he stuck his nose in town they would grab him, unless they were told to keep their hands off. This was worth a conference with Otis during which he might decide to give Andrews some more information.

He went over to the hotel, and rang up Walter Otis's room. The lawyer answered and invited him over. He found the Boston man seated before a table with a number of typewritten sheets spread before him.

"Hello, Mr. Andrews," he said. "I gave the boys the bottle of whisky and sent them over to Halliday's room to drink it. What's on your mind?"

"It seems to me," said Andrews in an aggrieved tone, "that I could be a lot more use if you let me in on this thing. I'm working in the dark. I took the liberty of ringing up the chief to make sure that your credential wasn't a fake."

"Very sensible of you."

"He says it's all right. Now I won't interfere with Phillips, but the local police don't know that the State wants him loose, and if they nab him you'll have to work another jail break. Shall I tell them to let him alone?"

"No. The fewer who are on the inside, the better at present. Tell the chief to remove his guards from the Peterson place. You've satisfied yourself there is nothing hidden there. What's the reason for keeping officers around. Murderers don't hang around the scene of their crime."

"Apparently Phillips does."

Otis laughed. "But he isn't a murderer."

"You may know it, but I don't."

"You'll learn in good time."

"I've got to take orders from you because those are my instructions, but it's the first time in my career that such a thing has happened, and I don't like it. What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. I want you to stay around the hotel this evening, and go to your room about ten o'clock. Go to bed, but don't sleep too soundly. There is a possibility that I may call you. So far as you are concerned, the situation is as it was before I came. I told you about Phillips, because you are pretty smart and you might nab him; as far as the local police are concerned, they don't bother me in the least."

"You're looking for the murderers to come back to-night?"

"I am hoping that they will follow Phillips back to the Peterson place."

"Do they know where he is?"

"If they are as alert as I suspect, they may."

"What's it all about?"

"I wish I could tell you, but it's better not to just at present."

"Well," growled Andrews, "this is all very irregular. You've brought my work to a dead stop. I was thinking of arresting Ruth Peterson as an accessory to the crime—I have evidence that she was on the spot—giving her the third degree, and making her confess her association with Phillips; but after what you tell me—"

"Have they got a strong lockup in the village?"

"Yes, it isn't bad."

"Then place her under arrest and keep her there overnight. She is in danger in this hotel."

"For the love of Pete, why?"

"Andrews, when this case is settled and the murderers caught, you are going to get all the credit. I can't appear in the thing. Now be a good fellow and control your curiosity. Go find Miss Peterson, lead her gently to the lockup, and tell the reporters that you have evidence which connects her with the crime: Peterson was killed so that his children could inherit his fortune after the will cutting them off with a few hundred dollars had been destroyed."

The detective looked blank. "It seems a rotten thing to do; it might ruin the girl's life, and I haven't actually got enough evidence."

"Orders," said the lawyer.

"All right."

He left the room, his perplexity increased rather than diminished, as a result of his interview, and went in search of Ruth.

He found her seated in the lobby in a circle of reporters, who were laughing gayly at a story she was telling them.

"Miss Peterson," he said gravely, "please pack your bag and come along with me."

She smiled up at him mockingly. "That sounds terrible!" she exclaimed. "What are you going to do with me?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to spend the night in the town lockup."

"For Heaven's sake, Andy!" exclaimed Halliday. "You're not crazy enough to arrest this poor child?"

"You mind your own business," he retorted. "Miss Peterson is suspected of knowing more about this crime than she admits."

Ruth's face grew grave and she paled a little, but she was a good sport.

"Do you put handcuffs on me?" she asked bitterly.

"Over my dead body!" exclaimed Halliday.

"You might as well be dead as the way you are," replied Andrews. "But it won't be necessary. Come, Miss Peterson."

"See you boys at the trial," she said with a laugh. "All right, officer—do your duty."

It is sad to relate that not even Halliday waited to accompany her and the officer to the station house. There was a wild rush for the telegraph office, for this was big news.

Walter Otis met the pair in the corridor outside Ruth's room. She did not appear to recognize him, nor he her; but Andrews saw his left eyelid droop slightly, whereupon she brightened up perceptibly.

"If you really want that shoe," she told Andrews as she gathered her things together, "here it is. So your guess that I dropped the pair into the river was as incorrect as all your other deductions."

"Much obliged," he answered.

He took the shoe and placed it in the pocket of his coat.

Fortunately it was only a few steps to the station house, for the whole town was bubbling with the news and a crowd was rapidly collecting when they left the hotel. Ruth flushed a little, but said nothing; and Andrews was morose because he felt that he was being played for a fool. If the arrest was simply to secure the girl's safety, why not tell her, and why humiliate her publicly? He had liked her right along, and this was not a pleasant task, particularly when it seemed evident that she was quite innocent of the crime.

Chief Easton was distressed, too, when the girl was committed to his charge.

"This is awful, Ruth," he said. "I suppose Mr. Andrews knows what he is doing, but I'd as soon suspect myself of murder as you."

She pressed his hand gratefully, and her eyes filled. "You're a good sort, Mr. Easton," she said. "I'm not afraid, because I can prove I had nothing to do with it."

CHAPTER XX.

AMON PETERSON, JR., MAKES A CALL.

IT has been some time since Amon Peterson, Jr., has been mentioned in this story, but he is rather an insignificant and unpleasing person, and since the funeral he had apparently been doing nothing of

importance. From the standpoint of the reporters he was uninteresting—just a cheap clerk. Ruth intrigued them; she was very pretty, willing to pose for pictures; she had been on the stage and in cabarets, had the glamour of the Great White Way about her; and the possibility that she would inherit part of a big fortune made her a figure of romance. So they kept playing her up, and rarely mentioned her brother, which made him jealous.

There are people who live and die without getting their pictures in the paper, and their names never get into print until their death notice is published, in which case it is often paid for at so much a line. Amon was of this sort; and, in his case, he wanted to be in the limelight.

He had approached the reporters several times and indicated his willingness to be interviewed. He told them how he had loved his father despite shabby treatment by the old man in his youth, and he burned to avenge his death. One or two of them made notes of his remarks, and even went so far as to include his statement in their stories, but the copy desk had cut them out; Amon, Jr., was not news.

Time hung heavily upon his hands in town. As the possible heir of a fortune, he did not wish to associate himself with the town boys with whom he used to play; as a matter of fact, he was greeted by them very coldly. But when he saw Mary Litchfield at the funeral his fishy eyes had gleamed and his heart had thumped in his thin body.

Mary Litchfield had been in high school when he had attended it, although she was two or three classes below him; she had remembered him when she came to the funeral, shaken hands, and told him she regretted his loss—just a perfunctory condolence.

The touch of her hand had thrilled him inexpressively. He had been dazzled by her beauty and impressed by her evident breeding and culture. In the old days he would not have dreamed of becoming friends with Mary Litchfield; she was far above him, the daughter of the richest man in town, he the neglected son of the town miser. But now, when he was likely to be worth half a million, he saw no reason why he should not meet her on even terms. And that night he determined to call at her house and pay his respects.

He put on his new black suit, slicked down his hair with vaseline, donned a new tie which he had bought in the afternoon, got his shoes shined, put on his new black overcoat, and sallied out of the hotel shortly after eight o'clock to pay his call.

After all, thought Amon, he was a New Yorker, and to Mary that must mean a lot, accustomed as she was to the society of village youths. He had heard some gossip that she had been friendly with Phillips who was only a mechanic at the garage, but of course that was nothing, particularly since it had been discovered that Phillips was a murderer and a fugitive from justice. He anticipated that Mary would be both glad and much flattered to receive his attentions.

The Litchfield house sat well back from the street in ample grounds which were surrounded by a low white picket fence behind which grew a fairly high hedge. In early April the leaves were not so thick on the hedge as they would be later, but it effectually concealed the grounds from the view of a person passing along the sidewalk. At eight fifteen it was quite dark, and there was no moon.

There was an occasional street lamp, and it happened that one was placed directly in front of the Litchfield gate. As Amon came up the street from the direction of the hotel, he saw a man turn a corner a block ahead and walk toward him. The man seemed anxious not to attract attention, kept close to the fence as he came along, and in the shadow of the hedge, but Amon thought nothing of that until the stranger reached the gate of the Litchfield place where he came under the glare of the street lamp; and Peterson saw to his astonishment that it was Bill Phillips, the fugitive, the murderer of his father. And Phillips pushed open the gate, and entered the Litchfield grounds.

Amon stopped short. While he had not set eyes on Phillips for four or five years he had grown up with him in the same village, and it was impossible for him to be mis-

taken. This criminal had the effrontery to return to Miltville; furthermore, he had the impudence to enter the grounds belonging to the girl whom Amon was about to honor with a visit.

Now here was a great opportunity, a marvelous opportunity. It was given to him to capture and turn over to the police the man who had killed his father. What a wonderful achievement that would be, how the newspapers would delight in that story. Avid reader of yellow journals as he was, hungry for publicity, anxious to elbow his sister out of the limelight, eager for cheap glory, thin, weak, insignificant, he yearned to be a hero, and here was his big chance.

For a second he meditated pouncing upon the wanted man, but he hesitated; and he who hesitates is lost. He remembered that he was unarmed, that he weighed one hundred and thirty-five pounds, that he didn't know how to fight. Suppose Phillips refused to be captured. Phillips was nearly six feet, and weighed a hundred and seventy; he was desperate, probably carried a gun, and had already killed a man. What chance did he have against such a desperado?

And then supposing Phillips killed him? What good is a dead hero? Right then and there he revised his program, and he altered the newspaper headline he had seen in his mind's eye, "Heroic son of murdered man captures father's slayer" to "Son of murdered man trails slayer and leads police to his hiding place."

Not quite so splendid, but good enough. They could not ignore him in either event. Now he remembered that Phillips was supposed to be in love with Mary Litchfield; probably he hoped to see her and tell her a lot of lies. Amon stepped over the picket fence, stooped, and managed to crawl under the hedge. He was now in the far corner of the lawn, and he could see that Phillips had not followed the path, but was slipping across the grass and heading for the farther side of the house.

Cautiously Amon crept along behind. He saw the fugitive climb up on the porch instead of using the steps, saw him throw a leg over the railing, and peer through the window of the parlor which was dimly lighted. By this time Amon was at the rail of the porch peering through. To his indignation he saw Mary come to the window, then it softly opened, and she stepped outside to be folded in a tight embrace. So that was the kind of girl she was, kissing and hugging a murderer.

"Let's go down to the summerhouse," he heard her say in a low tone; then the pair went to the end of the porch, lowered themselves to the ground, and sped across the grass like Paul and Virginia.

So far as Mary Litchfield was concerned, her chance of marrying the heir of the Peterson estate vanished then, but he had a double motive of revenge; it would hurt her to have Bill captured, and he would gloat as she cowered and sobbed. But the capturing, at least the manual labor part of it, had better be done by the proper authorities.

Amon turned and scuttled toward the fence, being careful to keep out of the circle of light at the gate. Again he crawled under the hedge, climbed over the fence, and sped rapidly back to town. He thought that the pair in the summerhouse were good for half an hour; in fifteen minutes he would be back with several sturdy policemen.

A few minutes later he burst into the station house where Chief Easton, who worked evenings as well as all day since the crime, was laboriously making out some police papers.

"I've got him," he exclaimed. "I've caught my father's murderer."

"You don't say?' asked the chief satirically. "Is he in your pocket or waiting outside, and who do you mean?"

"Bill Phillips. I haven't got him, but I know where he is right now. I can lead you to him."

The chief now became excited. "Where is he?"

"In the Litchfield summerhouse with Mary Litchfield."

"Then we'll get him," said Easton rather sadly. He hated to hurt Mary, but he had to do his duty. "Wait a minute. I've only got one officer on to-night and he has to guard the station; we've got a prisoner."

"Ruth can't get out."

"Can't leave the place deserted. You run over to the hotel and get Detective Andrews. He and I will do this job."

"He may get away."

"You don't expect me to catch a murderer single-handed?" complained the chief. "Do as I say. And don't tell the reporters; they might scare him away."

Amon would have enjoyed having the reporters along, but he did not want to lose the murderer; so he hastened across to the hotel and found Andrews in his usual big chair in the lobby.

The wild look in the boy's eye told the detective that something unusual was afoot, and he took him by the arm and led him to a corner which was quite secluded before he would let him speak.

"Now what is it?"

"I've seen Phillips; at least I know where he is. The chief wants you to come right over and help him catch him."

In view of what Otis had told him, this information was very distasteful to Andrews, but there was nothing for him to do except follow the Peterson youth across the street to the station house.

Easton had buckled on his gun, put on his hat and coat and was standing by his auto ready for action, and Andrews climbed in as a matter of course.

"I'm coming along, too," said Amon excitedly.

"Do you know where Phillips is?" asked Andrews of the chief, who nodded.

"No, you're not," he told Amon.

"I am, too. I found him; you have no right to leave me out of it."

"Start her up, chief," was the brusque command and Easton set the car in motion leaving the discomfited boy behind. But Amon wanted to be in at the death, and he started to run after the machine which soon left him far behind.

"Where is he?" asked the detective.

"In Litchfield's summerhouse with Mary, poor girl."

"The darn fool," thought Andrews. "Won't Otis be wild!"

They ran the auto to the corner of the street, then drew up by the curb and got out. They entered the grounds as Amon had done, over the fence and under the hedge.

"Let's separate. You take him on one side, and me on the other," whispered the chief, but Andrews had his own reasons for refusing.

"We'll keep together; he's a desperate man," he said. Easton agreed readily; until this minute he had not thought of poor Bill as a desperate man, and he didn't like the notion.

The capture of Phillips, in view of his explicit instructions to leave him at large, was something he had to prevent at all hazards, but Andrews was in a quandary as to how to avoid it. Otis should have permitted him to warn the chief—well, he would do it if it were necessary though it was against orders.

Chance came to his assistance as they were within a hundred feet of the summerhouse, for the hired man had left a flowerpot lying on the lawn, and Easton tripped over it, swearing loudly as he fell. Instantly a man's figure darted out of the summerhouse, and sped back toward the other side of the grounds.

Easton scrambled to his feet. "Stop or I fire," he shouted. The man kept on running. Thereupon the old chief leveled his gun and pulled the trigger, but at that instant Andrews also stumbled and fell against Easton, bringing him to the ground. One bullet escaped from his revolver, but if it hit anything it was a distant star.

As they picked themselves up Andrews saw that the fugitive had escaped. Cursing him for his stupidity, the chief ran in the direction taken by Phillips, but a few seconds later the sound of an automobile starter and the rattle of an engine told that Phillips had got into a car and was already out of reach.

Looking behind, Andrews chuckled to see a white-clad figure climbing over the end of the porch; it was Mary getting back into the house. Then the front door of the Litchfield home opened, and John Litchfield ran out in his shirt sleeves. And at the gate, beneath the light; was Amon Peterson, Jr., dancing and shaking his fists with rage. Through the stupidity of the police he had lost his hope of glory.

"I certainly beg your pardon, chief," Andrews said to Easton as they walked to meet the furious Litchfield. "That was some stupid of me, bumping into you that way."

"I'm glad you did," said Easton. "I had to do my duty, but I never shot a man in my life, and I wouldn't want to hit Bill Phillips; I used to be in love with his mother."

John Litchfield bristled up, recognized the chief and the detective, and grew less truculent.

"What was that shooting?" he demanded. "It seemed to be in my garden."

"It was," replied Andrews dryly. "We were chasing a fugitive from justice who came right into your yard."

"Who was it?"

"Bill Phillips," the chief told him.

"Bill Phillips! Where's my Mary?" He turned and ran back into the house, and that disposed of him. But they still had to meet Amon Peterson, Jr.

"What did you let him get away for?" whined the amateur and frustrated hero. "Now you won't catch him after I found him for you. Why didn't you take me with you?"

"Aw, shut up," growled Andrews. "Good Lord, chief, it was your car he got away in."

The flivver had been parked close to the place where Phillips had broken through the hedge; he had leaped into it and away, which made it necessary for the two officers to walk back to the station house followed by the indignant Peterson whose muttered reflections upon the competency of the police caused Chief Easton's ears to burn.

They could not pursue Phillips on foot; Andrews did not want to pursue him—the chief was bemoaning the loss of his car, his own property, not furnished by the town—and it was a disconsolate group which walked into the station house fifteen or twenty minutes later. The chief had been away from his desk not more than forty minutes in all, during which time he had achieved no glory.

There was nobody in the office, and Easton looked into the back room where there was a sofa upon which the two men ordinarily on night duty took turns in snoozing. And there was nobody in the back room.

CHAPTER XXI.

DOINGS AT THE JAIL.

"WHERE'S your policeman?" asked Andrews in surprise.

"Darn funny!" muttered Easton. "He wouldn't leave the station while I was gone, 'specially with a prisoner."

Andrews started. "That's it! Quick, to Miss Peterson's cell!"

The station house was a one-story building, with an office and back room at the rear of which was a heavy oak door leading to the lock-up. There were four cells in a row in the lock-up, with grated doors looking upon a corridor from which windows opened. There were no windows in the cells. It was a comparatively modern building, and the chance of a person locked in making his escape was not good.

Easton threw open the door and ran down the corridor, followed closely by Andrews and young Peterson, to whom they had paid no attention, but who had clung to them like a hound pup. In the second cell Ruth had been imprisoned, but, upon looking inside, the chief saw the despondent figure of Herbert Sears, the night man.

"Where's Miss Peterson?" shouted Easton, wild with anger and humiliation.

Sears looked up, recognized his superior officer, and got upon his feet.

"Chief, I resign," he announced. "I got a weak heart. Ghosts out at Peterson's were bad enough, but holding up a police station is too much. A feller ain't safe anywhere."

"What happened?" demanded Andrews, grinning in spite of himself, for this was the ghost which had alarmed him the night before. "Where's the girl?"

"They took her."

"Who took her? How? When?" exclaimed Easton.

"Let the big boob tell us in his own way," suggested Andrews. "Open the door and let him out."

"He ought to be kept in there," growled the chief, but he drew out his keys and unlocked the cell door.

Sears, who was a big, rawboned, simple looking country cop, slouched into the corridor.

"It was a few minutes after you left with Mr. Andrews," he said. "A big car drove up, and a fellow got out and came into the office. He had a blue cap on, and a big blue overcoat with the collar turned up; I couldn't see much of his face. I thought he was a motorist come in to ask directions—and I looked up right into the muzzle of a revolver.

"'Go into the back room,' he said. Well, what could I do? He followed me in and closed the door behind me.

"'Open the door to the lock-up,' sez he. I opened it.

"'Which is Miss Peterson's cell?'

"I had to show him.

"'Open the door,' he tells me. I opened the cell.

"'Come out,' he said to Miss Peterson. 'I don't want to come out,' she screams.

"'Go in and bring her out,' he tells me. What could I do?

"So I went in and took her by the arms and led her out; she struggled hard, too. He put one arm around her and held her tight; he was a big, strong feller. 'Get into the cell,' he said to me. Then he closed the door on me, and locked it. The girl was putting up a fuss, but he drew something from his pocket and jabbed it into her arm, and it made her quiet."

"Morphine," observed Andrews.

"It wasn't any good for me to yell; nobody can hear anything in the lock-up; so I just sat here until you come back."

"Your resignation is accepted," declared Easton savagely. "You're a hell of a cop!"

"I'm damn glad of it."

"Of course you'd know this fellow again if you saw him," said Andrews.

"I guess so, though he was all muffled up."

"You let a man come in and hold up the police station and carry off a prisoner single-handed," said the chief scornfully. "This is terrible."

"He had a gun."

"So did you."

"But he had the drop on me."

"Oh, let him alone," said Andrews in a weary tone. He was very tired, baffled, angry, and alarmed. The chief followed him back into the office, and then Peterson annoyed them by displaying a sudden concern for the welfare of his sister.

"If I hear another word out of you," snarled Andrews, "I'll put you in that lock-up for the rest of the night. We'll find your sister, but you keep your mouth shut, do you understand? I don't know but you cooked this whole thing up about Phillips so that you could get us away and give confederates a chance to rescue your sister. It's very suspicious."

Amon began to protest at the injustice of the charge, but he had lost his truculence, and he readily consented to obey orders. Then Andrews sent him back to the hotel.

"Do you believe that?" asked the chief, as soon as they were alone.

"No; I just wanted to get rid of him."

"But it is suspicious that they raided the lock-up as soon as we left. Maybe it wasn't Phillips at all."

"From what I've seen of Miss Litchfield, she wouldnt' be alone in that summer-house with any other man; so you can be sure it was Phillips."

"Then who came after Miss Peterson?"

"No friend of hers. Didn't you hear Sears say that he had to give her a jab with a needle to make her go with him? He had a machine, and he's apt to be twenty miles away in any direction by now. Suppose you go out and see if you can find anybody who can give you a description of the automobile."

"I wouldn't be left alone here," wailed the discharged policeman.

"Don't be a fool, Sears," laughed Andrews. "There is nothing left in this jail to steal."

The detective walked slowly back to the hotel. Things were in a terrible muddle, but he could not blame himself for what had happened. Otis had no business leaving him in the dark; it was his fault that everything had gone wrong. He had wanted to tip off Easton not to pursue Phillips, and Otis had vetoed the sugges-

tion, which made it impossible for him to refuse to accompany the chief on the man hunt. He had prevented the capture of the fugitive without awakening suspicion, but by so doing had given their unknown antagonists the opportunity to capture Ruth.

Otis had reason to believe that Ruth was in danger to-night, and had jumped at the idea of arresting her and locking her up to safeguard her. As a result, she had fallen into the hands of the enemy, and that was liable to play hob with the lawyer's plans, whatever they were. Evidently it was his duty to supply Otis with the news, but he didn't know where the man could be found.

His own instructions were to remain at the hotel on call, and he had been forced to disobey them to accompany Easton. He had a suspicion that Otis was lurking in the vicinity of the Peterson place, but if he went out there in search of him he would be disobeying orders a second time, and he might ruin whatever plans were depending on the watch on the Peterson house.

Andrews was at his wits' end, and whenever he got into that condition he became very surly. If a failure resulted from the existing state of affairs he would receive all the blame for it, and he had nothing to do with it. Otis might be a good lawyer, but he didn't know anything about the detective business, and he had no business butting in. Politics—that was the cause of it all; politics, the ruination of the country.

He began to consider the fiasco at Litchfield's. Phillips seemed to have got out of hand, probably sneaked away from Otis, and went to pay a call on his girl, came within an ace of getting captured and gumming up the whole works.

He passed through the lobby, asked if there were any calls for him, learned that there were none, went up to his room, and lay down on the bed without undressing; evidently he had not marred Otis's plans by his excursion, since the lawyer had not summoned him.

The case as he summed it up now stood about like this: He had evidence that Phillips had committed the crime, pretty nearly enough to convict, but Phillips was innocent upon Otis's say-so. He had proof that Ruth Peterson had been on the scene, but she also was innocent, according to Otis. That disposed of the case as it was being built up by himself, and he didn't have a blessed thing to substitute for it. Perhaps he was lucky to have the case taken out of his hands.

However, somebody killed Peterson, and the motive was not connected with the missing will; it was something entirely different. The man who had carried Ruth, against her will, away from the lock-up, was a new factor entirely; Otis might know who he was, but Andrews didn't. Evidently Otis, Ruth, and Phillips had been inside the Peterson grounds, either in the house or in the barn, at the same time the murder was committed, and they were there to watch the old man or somebody who was visiting him, or both.

Probably the murder had taken them unawares; it was outside the program; and the quick twist of suspicion upon Phillips had embarrassed whatever plans Otis had been making with the aid of these confederates. The law had jumped upon Phillips, and it had been necessary to get him out of the hands of the law in the interest of what?

What did the unknown want of Ruth Peterson? Was she in personal danger, or was her capture another phase of the queer game that Otis was playing? If he were responsible for the hold-up of the station house, well and good, otherwise he ought to be working for her recapture.

His orders from Otis tied him to the hotel, and the chief was already sending out an alarm. It would be hard to hide an attractive girl like that; perhaps ordinary police methods would round her up before very long. Andrews felt himself becoming very much alarmed about Ruth; from the beginning he had liked her, although he had no illusions about her; he had not failed in his duty because of the fascination she had for him, and he wanted to appear efficient in her eyes, which was why he got very angry when she mocked him.

He had disliked the business of arresting her; in fact, he had mentioned it to

Otis, because he had expected to have the notion vetoed, and instead he was ordered to conduct her to the lock-up. Now it turned out that he had placed her in danger, although it seemed as though she could have been captured more easily from the hotel than from the jail, if enemies were after her.

He got very nervous lying on the bed doing nothing; and finally he decided, orders or no orders, Otis or no Otis, he would wait an hour longer, then he would get up and do something, anything. He looked at his watch, and it was just ten o'clock.

CHAPTER XXII.

RUTH MEETS SOME GENTLEMEN.

IN a sense Henry Andrews, State detective, is the hero of this story, despite his forty-five years, his paunch, and his grouches; after all, the champion of the State, the guardian of our homes and the terror of wrongdoers is the best sort of a hero; doesn't he risk his life and trap dangerous criminals for a small salary, and if it were not for such men who could sleep easily at night?

I know it is the habit to sneer and poke fun at police detectives who are pictured as thick-witted, and who never solve a mystery unless some gifted amateur with a knowledge of botany and Sanskrit comes along and does their work for them, being careful to bow themselves out before the final curtain and let the policeman take the credit because of their distaste for notoriety; the truth is that about ninety-nine per cent of the mysteries that get solved are cleared up by the police detectives.

Andrews was not romantic-looking; for him to figure in the love interest of this story would be droll. He did not take any stock in the emotion himself, had never been devoted to a woman except his mother, yet, as he lay on his back in his bed, he was worrying about Ruth Peterson rather more than a detective officer would be likely to worry about a person who did not seem to figure as more than a valuable witness.

While he was lying in bed thinking about her, Ruth was sitting in the back seat of a big sedan which was moving very rapidly, getting rid of the effect of the morphine injection which had enabled her captor to abstract her from the lock-up without much difficulty, and wondering what it was all about.

Silent, beside her, sat a big man whose chin was buried in the collar of a heavy blue coat, and whose blue cap was pulled down over his forehead. Ruth studied him, but he was not a person to whom she had ever been introduced so far as she could remember.

Although she was not easily frightened, she was conscious of being alarmed by this situation. But curiosity finally overcame her terror.

"Hello, Lochinvar," she said pertly. "I thought you used to ride a horse."

The man looked her over grimly, then smiled.

"Hello, chicken," he retorted. "It's Jesse James you're thinking about, ain't it?" He was a roughneck, she could tell that from his speech, probably a gunman.

"Much obliged for busting into the hoosegow to rescue me, but I don't remember sending out any S O S."

"There was a feller wanted to see you to-night; so I came after you."

"You don't say. What for?"

"I don't know."

"Where are we going?"

"Not very far."

"Who is this fellow who wants to see me; why didn't he come himself?"

"Oh, don't bother me, you'll find out soon enough."

Ruth stopped talking, but her thoughts were active. She wondered if Andrews was already in pursuit, and if Walter Otis knew of her plight. There was a chance of rescue from two different sources, but somehow she had more confidence in the detective; he would assume that her confederates in the murder had got her out of jail, and he would be hot on the trail.

Ruth didn't blame Andrews for suspecting her of the crime or at least of complicity in it; she knew he had certain evidence, and she had read in his gruffness when he

had taken her off to the lock-up an intense distaste for the job, which pleased her somehow. Andrews would follow these kidnapers and perhaps catch the real criminals. So she leaned back against the cushions and closed her eyes. When the car slowed down somewhat she opened them and saw they were entering a large town well-lighted; in a moment she recognized a certain building and knew that they were in Oakdale, the county seat.

They went slowly through the streets until they reached the residence section on the farther side of town, suddenly swung in between a pair of gate posts, ran fifty feet up a driveway, stopped under a *porte cochère,* and somebody opened the door of the car.

"Want a jab of this needle, or will you go quietly and keep your mouth shut?" asked the man on the seat beside her.

"Oh, I'll be good; I hate getting stabbed."

He got out, offered his hand which she accepted, and they climbed half a dozen steps, crossed a porch, and entered a house which she judged to be a residence of eight or ten rooms, painted white, nondescript in architecture.

Her guide led her into a back room which seemed to be used as an office. It contained a desk and a bookcase with those yellow leather books on the shelves which are printed by the State at considerable expense, and supplied to lawyers who use them for decorations rather than for reference, the acts of various legislatures. There was an electric lamp with a green shade on the desk, and behind it sat a pompous little man with a nail brush mustache whom she recognized with a start of surprise as Henry Finch, her father's lawyer.

There was another man in the room, a tall, dark, foreign-looking person who might have been an Italian, an Armenian, or an Egyptian.

"You know me, Miss Peterson," said Finch. "I am your father's attorney."

"Yes, I saw you in Miltville the other day. Very sweet of you to take me out of that nasty jail. But wasn't it rather dangerous? Why did you do it?"

"Ahem," said Finch, "please take a chair, Miss Ruth. This is my friend Mr. Wompers, an old friend of your father's."

Ruth regarded him with interest. "Fancy anybody being a friend of my father's," she said. Mr. Wompers grinned slightly, looking very much like a wolf when he did so. She shivered; he frightened her.

"We could not permit them to keep you in prison," said Finch. "You were in grave danger of being convicted of killing your father, Miss Peterson. Andrews has positive evidence that you were in the house when the murder was committed."

"Well, I wasn't," she retorted.

"No; we know you were not; that's why we came to your aid. Protecting the innocent."

"I certainly am much obliged. Can you give me a cigarette?"

"And a drink if you like."

"No, thanks." She lighted the cigarette, and regarded the pair from half-closed eyes.

"Beside your desire to protect the innocent from the law, you had another reason for getting me out of jail," she informed Mr. Finch.

"Yes. Now, Miss Ruth, you knew that your father had made a will disinheriting you and your brother, and you decided to get possession of that will. Am I correct?"

"Go on," she said.

"So you came secretly to Miltville, went out to your old home, went inside, crept into your father's room while he lay asleep, and stole his clothes."

"Why should I steal his clothes?"

"Because you knew that one of his eccentricities was that he always carried valuable papers in his pockets, did not put them in the vaults or hide them about the place."

"And after I stole his clothes, what?"

"You fled from the house, entered an automobile, and drove back to New York."

"Indeed."

"You got into your room about seven in the morning, and pretended to have been there all night. You had fixed up a fake alibi with some friends to prove you had not left the city."

"You forgot to mention that I also killed my father."

"You didn't kill him; you left half an hour before he was killed by William Phillips."

"It's wonderful how you know these things," she said admiringly. "Were you in the house, Mr. Finch?"

"Never mind that; it's enough that we know, isn't it, Mr. Wompers?"

"You bet yer sweet life," said Mr. Wompers.

"Now, Ruth, are you aware that it is a State prison offense to steal and destroy a will?"

"Is it?" she asked, looking frightened.

"Yes. Furthermore, I did not tell all I know when I said I did not have a copy of that will. I have such a copy which I can produce, thus your daring act turns out to be of no avail."

"But you are ready to give me that copy for a consideration."

"Yes. You make an agreement with me to turn over twenty-five per cent of your share and your brother's, and I will destroy my copy, provided—"

"Ah," she breathed.

"That you also turn over to me the other papers that were in your father's breast pocket."

"Which one? There were several."

"All of them. I am particularly interested in one which had a diagram on it, a sort of drawing on one side and a list of names on the back."

"So it was to get possession of that diagram that you and Mr. Wompers killed my father."

"How dare you!" exclaimed Mr. Finch, jumping quite out of his chair.

"Girl's cookoo," observed Mr. Wompers who did not move.

"Well, I don't mind telling you that there were no papers in my father's clothes, none at all," she said blandly.

"You lie," gritted Wompers fiercely.

"Neither the will, nor anything else. And I don't mind adding that I did not know that my father had made a will cutting my brother and myself off with five hundred dollars; and I did not go to the house to steal it, and I attended 'Sonny' in New York on the night of the murder, went to a friend's house afterward, and went straight home. What do you think of that?"

Finch regarded her with anger. "There is no use in this sort of thing. You were seen to enter and leave the house—we know all about your alibi; forget it. What did you do with the clothing?"

"Nothing. I never had it; you are barking up the wrong tree, Mr. Finch."

"This dame led us on deliberately to give ourselves away, and then she pulls this," declared Mr. Wompers. "Now suppose we cut out the society stuff and give her the works."

"We have no knowledge, of course, that the papers were in his clothes," protested Finch, "that was conjecture based upon the knowledge that she stole them. Drop the pretense, Ruth, and tell us what you did with the clothing."

"That's my story and I stick to it," she said jauntily. "Now send me back to the jail like a nice good lawyer."

"Give her the works, I tell you," commanded Wompers.

"Time enough for that. Wait until we hear what is happening; it may not be necessary."

"We'll dope her and lay her away until we want her."

"No," protested Ruth. "No more dope, I'm sick now."

"Will you tell the truth?"

"I've told it."

"We'll lock her in the attic," said Finch. "There are no windows, and she can't get out. In the morning, if other things have failed, we'll talk to her seriously."

"You're too damn chicken-hearted," protested Wompers.

"I don't believe in unnecessary violence," said Mr. Finch.

They led Ruth up three flights of stairs and into an unfinished attic entered by a door at the head of the stairs. Then they closed the door; she heard them lock it, and she was alone in the dark. Apparently, the place had no furniture and no windows, and she shivered with apprehension. She was a very brave girl, but she was desperately afraid of the dark.

Why didn't Andrews come? If he was a good detective he should be on hand al-

ready. He must have suspected Finch; anybody would suspect Finch as quickly as he looked at him, therefore things were not so bad. She was hidden in Finch's house in Oakdale and Andrews should have no trouble in locating her.

This Wompers was a terrible person; he looked like a professional murderer. Undoubtedly he had killed her father. Where were Walter Otis and Bill Phillips? It was their business to protect her, too. But they thought she was safe in the lock-up. These men might be very brutal to her. They might torture her; Wompers would, but anything would be better than the dark.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DETECTIVE IS DISOBEDIENT.

AT eleven o'clock Andrews could stand inaction no longer. He rose, put on his coat, collar, and necktie, donned his light overcoat, and prepared to leave the room. His hand struck something hard in his pocket, and he pulled out Ruth Peterson's little shoe. The big man looked at it, and an expression queer for him crossed his ugly face; it was a flash of tenderness. It was a pretty, foolish-looking little piece of leather, too small, apparently to be serviceable—to think that that slipper might have been responsible for sending a gay, lovely thing like Ruth to jail for life; thank heaven, it wasn't such a deadly shoe as it had seemed to him when he first stole it; now it was a present. Ruth had given it to him. It was almost a token.

He laid the shoe away in a bureau drawer and went down into the lobby. Miltville was in the process of locking up; there was nobody but the night clerk in the lobby, and already the shopfronts outside were dark. He drifted into the street, turned to the right, and was passing the garage when an automobile drew up beside the gas pump. There was nothing unusual about that; cars were shooting through Miltville at all hours, and often stopped for gasoline.

He observed it carefully until he saw a face. A man in the back seat had looked out the window, and it was a man he knew—he couldn't place him for a minute, but he knew it was a criminal's face. He walked on; apparently, he had seen nothing, but his card-index mind was busy.

The greatest stock in trade of a detective is his ability to remember faces. Andrews could glimpse a crook once and remember him years later, and this person in the automobile was a crook—when had he seen him last and in what connection?

He walked on, the machine loaded up, and moved away from the garage, it passed Andrews traveling fast, and then he remembered. The man in the back seat was Charlie West, a waterfront crook in Boston. He had been brought up in the case of some big warehouse thefts in East Boston some five years before.

Shipments of silk and satins had been disappearing from one of the steamship line piers for some time, and Andrews had been put on the case to help the Boston detectives. It developed that certain wharf watchmen had been in a plot with the thieves, and the person who was supposed to have engineered the transactions was West. Though they had captured the actual thieves, they were not able to pin anything on West, but in the minds of the officers there was no question about his guilt.

And he was in Miltville. Andrews could see the tail light of the car fast disappearing. Quite a ways up, it stopped for a few seconds, then continued. It seemed to him that it had stopped about at the corner of Cedar and Main Street, and probably had paused to permit passengers to alight. Those who did not believe that Andrews could move rapidly should have seen the big man then. He did not know who had been set on the ground or why, but the Peterson place was on Cedar Street, and a crook named West had been in the automobile, which was quite enough for him.

When he reached the corner of Cedar Street, there was nobody visible on the street ahead of him, but they would be apt to slink along in the shadows if their mission was unlawful. Andrews also slipped along as unobtrusively as possible. While he had orders to stay in the hotel, and while he might be disarranging the plans

of his boss by trailing West, he thought that the new arrival or arrivals might also be bent upon disarranging the plans of the amateur detective; and he could be of more service lurking in the background than half a mile away at the hotel. Anyway he would take that chance.

By and by he came to the Peterson place, gaunt and ghostly in the very dim moonlight; and he peered across the big yard from the lower corner of the fence, but he saw no shadow or shadows creeping toward the house, while the black windows of the old home of Amon Peterson seemed to give evidence that nothing lurked within its walls.

Although he had not been so informed, Andrews suspected that Otis and Bill Phillips were concealed either in the house or the barn waiting and watching. The question was whether West alone or accompanied, was the person they hoped to catch, or whether he was an unanticipated augmentation of the opponents. It was a strange situation; a man wanted for murder, a fugitive, upon whose head a price had already or would soon be set, a highly respected lawyer and politician, engaged in some private war against persons unknown, while the officer whose business it was to solve the mystery dared not intrude upon them, could not interfere with them, did not know whether the criminal he had recently recognized was an enemy of theirs or a confederate.

He held his post a quarter of an hour during which nothing stirred, no sound came to his ears save the chirping of frogs and crickets. Finally, he lifted himself with difficulty over the fence, and lay flat for a moment upon the ground inside. Peterson's land had a frontage of about one hundred and fifty feet, and ran back about two hundred; land was cheap in Miltville.

The house stood back from the street about fifty feet, the barn was at the right another fifty feet in the rear. From his post the house was only sixty or seventy feet away, the barn a hundred, quite close enough for observation. He crept cautiously nearer to the house, straining his ears for some sound which would indicate that he was not alone on the place, but he had heard nothing. West, if he had come here at all, had vanished.

He remembered that there was a window at the back of the barn, the sill of which was only three feet above the ground; if Phillips and Otis were hiding within, if there was anything going on in the barn he might see something by peering through the window. Softly he moved his bulk to the rear of the barn and peeked, but everything was black inside. If there were occupants they were displaying no lights. With that sense that is outside the five known senses, he became convinced that the barn was not inhabited at present.

He turned and scratched his head—the whole thing was too much for him. In that position, he was facing the rear of the Peterson place, which was separated from the lot on the back street by a low fence of rough boards. The back street was Pine Street, and he remembered that there was an old tumbledown rookery standing on this lot, one of those relics so common in New England villages, a house whose owners had died off or moved elsewhere, upon which no money had been expended for years, which was marked by a signboard reading " For Sale or To Let," and which had gone to rack and ruin with never a purchaser or tenant appearing through the years.

He could make out the outline of the old house from where he stood, and as he looked, he saw the rear windows suddenly lighten with a pale grayish light, which immediately went out. It came again, but this time there was a light-yellow glow; it vanished and returned, but it had a crimson tinge.

Andrews needed no more; that house was on fire. He started running, crashed against the back fence, and pulled himself over it. At the moment when he was climbing the fence he heard a motor start on the back street, and then an automobile drove away. The house was on fire and somebody had set the fire.

Just why he hastened to the burning house he could not have told himself. He felt that something was wrong. There was no reason for burning down this ancient relic unless it had something to do with

West; perhaps he had merely used the Peterson grounds as a convenient way to reach the place, meanwhile the machine had circled around and picked him up as soon as he started the blaze.

During the minute or two it had taken him to get to the rear of the old house the fire had made great headway, the windows were glowing bright red now, and smoke was pouring through chinks in the roof. He saw that the basement windows at the rear were boarded, evidently to keep out tramps and mischievous boys.

In ten minutes the place would be a pile of smoking ruins, nothing to stop the fire; probably the fire department of Miltville could not have stopped it if they had arrived on the minute; the old timbers would burn like kindling. There was nothing he could do save watch the bonfire. It was getting hot; now the heat was breaking the windows, and black and yellow smoke, and tongues of flame were pouring through.

Andrews began to back away when he heard a sound, not the crackling of the flames. It was a pounding on the boards over one of the basement windows. He listened; it was heavy banging as though somebody were striking desperately at the boards with a club, perhaps a chair. That meant there was some one alive in the place.

The detective rushed to the window from which the sound was coming, and he saw one of the planks shake as it received a resounding whack.

"Who's in there?" he shouted.

"Help, help," came from within, a male voice, unknown to him.

"Stop banging. I'll get you out," he bellowed. Then he caught the edge of one of the boards in his bare hands; he was very strong, and with all the power of his back and shoulders he yanked; the nails yielded slowly, then the board came off. He grasped the next one, it was easier, and came away so suddenly he toppled backward. When he got to his feet the body of a man was being pushed through the hole, and with a gasp of astonishment he recognized the head of Walter Otis.

He ran to his assistance, and tugged and yanked until the hips came through the narrow opening. Otis was unconscious, and Andrews laid him on the ground twenty feet away. While he was busy with the lawyer he saw a second man forcing himself through the hole, but he was too big, his shoulders would not come through. Andrews ran back, got hold of a third plank, tugged and pulled until it gave way, when the second individual wormed out and fell upon the ground.

"Any more in there?"

"No," gasped the man on the ground.

Andrews turned his back. "Be out of my sight before I turn around," he said. "Quick."

He heard the man stumbling as he moved away, but Andrews kept his pose until he was sure he was out of sight. It was his business to arrest Bill Phillips on sight, but he hadn't seen him.

The fire was blazing hot and the building was beginning to shake; in a few minutes the walls would give way and the roof would tumble in. Andrews went back to Otis and bent over him, recognized the odor of chloroform and understood something of what had happened.

He picked the lawyer up in his strong arms, and carried him a safe distance from the burning house; then squatted beside him to wait until the effect of the drug was obliterated by the fresh cool air.

In the meantime, the fire had not gone unnoticed. Half-dressed people were beginning to appear in the street beyond, and some were running across lots.

Mostly, they were unconcerned. The house was old, uninhabited, and useless. None of them would have set it on fire, but since it had to burn they were glad to be able to witness the great bonfire. It was far enough removed from other dwellings to make a general conflagration impossible. They lined the street chattering and laughing, totally unaware of the ghastly tragedy so narrowly averted, and growing in numbers constantly.

Presently, there came a clanging gong and the roar of a motor, and the chemical truck, fifty per cent of the fire department of Miltville, arrived on the scene, followed by the hook and ladder to the sides of which clung the volunteer firemen in vari-

ous stages of undress, but all wearing the romantic fire hat. In Miltville, you were exempted from jury duty if you were a volunteer fireman; anyway, the job had lost little of the fascination with the coming of steam and motor vehicles which it had possessed in the days of hand engines.

There wasn't a blessed thing the fire department could do except run around and make motions, but they got a line of hose playing just as the building collapsed, and they played it upon the flames with gusto, rejoicing in the hissing and steaming of the fire as the cold water struck it.

Andrews paid no attention to them; he was watching Otis who was recovering consciousness.

"Where am I?" he asked conventionally.

"Lying on the ground watching a perfectly elegant fire," grinned the detective.

"Hello, Andrews," he muttered. "How did you get here?"

"Oh, I had a hunch you might need me. What happened?"

"I feel terrible. I'm sick to my stomach. I was drugged."

"So I noticed."

"Let me see. I was inside a house—in a room," muttered Otis.

"Yep. In a room in that house—take a look."

Otis raised himself on his elbow, saw the snapping, roaring, crackling bonfire. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed.

"I'll tell you what happened. You were drugged, locked up in a basement with the windows boarded up, and then they set fire to the house."

"Yes, I guess so."

"The question is: who did it?"

"I don't know."

"You're a hell of a detective," said Andrews in disgust.

"Where's Bill? He was with me. Is he in there?"

"A person unknown to me passed you out through the window after I pulled the boards off. I should hate to think it was Bill Phillips, the man wanted for murder," said Andrews satirically.

"Thank heaven he escaped," muttered Otis. He sat up and watched the fire dully.

"Evidently we both owe our lives to you," he said. "I am very grateful, Andrews. I won't forget this."

"You better forget it," growled Andrews. "Feel able to talk sense now?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Suppose you talk it. If I obeyed your orders you would both be dead, and the undertaker would be cheated out of a couple of coffins. Now come through with the facts; I've demonstrated that you need me."

"Of course. I intended to take you into our confidence."

"Well, what's it all about? And by the way, was it you, or your friends who broke into the jail and carried off Ruth Peterson?"

"What? They've got Ruth?"

"Whoever they are, they have certainly got her."

"But I had her put in the jail to be safe," he exclaimed.

"This seems to be a very unsafe jail; they captured it and locked the cop in charge in Ruth's cell. Now who did it, and how do we go about rescuing her?"

"Can't we get back to the hotel; we can't talk here. Look."

Chief Easton was coming, fast.

"Say nothing about our escape," whispered Otis.

"Good evening, Mr. Andrews," said the chief. "Do you know anything about this fire?"

"It is a very nice fire," said Andrews. "We were at the Peterson place and came over."

"Can't understand how it happened," exclaimed the chief. "Fortunately nobody lived there."

"Will you give us a lift back in your car?"

"You forget it was stolen last night."

"Oh, yes," remembered Andrews.

"But you can go back on one of the fire trucks. They're all through."

"Might just as well not have come," grinned the detective.

"Oh, they did fine work. Prevented it from spreading. One of the reporters said he never saw a fire better handled."

"He was kidding you. Come on, Mr. Otis."

Otis was still a trifle weak, but managed to walk to the street and climb upon the hook and ladder. Andrews passed an arm around him to make sure he would not tumble off the step, and presently the truck started back to the garage.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DARK SECRET.

IN a very little while the pair reached the hotel and went directly to the chamber of Walter Otis, whereupon the lawyer lay down on the bed.

"Now let's have the dark secret," suggested Andrews. "You fellows have taken three strikes and very nearly lost your lives. It's my turn to go to bat. What kind of pitching am I up against?"

Otis smiled. "I'll be glad of your help, Andrews. In one sense, this affair is out of your line, for the murder is only one angle of it."

"So I surmised."

"For a couple of years back a tremendous amount of narcotic drugs have been coming on the market, particularly in New England. The government has been very much worried; it's ordinary resources have been useless to stem the tide, and extraordinary measures were necessary. During the war I served in Washington as a dollar-a-year man; I have personal reasons to detest the drug traffic; and I have a very wide acquaintance and sources of information in New England that are rather unusual. I volunteered to take charge of the campaign—unofficially, of course. Naturally I was in touch with the secret agents of the government all over the country.

"My investigations convinced me that recently somebody had embarked in the business upon a gigantic scale; ordinarily drug smuggling is a small affair, in the hands of common crooks, who bring it in in small quantities because they have comparatively little capital. Opium, as you know, is tremendously valuable; there is a big profit in a few ounces, more in a ton of it than in a couple of shiploads of Scotch whisky.

"The League of Nations is trying to put a stop to the traffic all over the world, and through the activities of its agents we now know what is the available supply, and what sales are made in India and other Asiatic countries where it is produced."

"I may be foolish in the head, but what has all this got to do with the murder of a miser in Miltville?"

"We found," continued the lawyer, "that recently it was being purchased in tremendously increased quantities, so much so that the price of the stuff at the source had increased about thirty per cent.

"Smuggling opium is comparatively easy because it has so little bulk; it was just a question of organization and plenty of money to bring in large quantities of it. What I set myself to find out was who might be financing these operations and put my finger on him, and the rest was comparatively simple.

"Very wealthy men are careful to keep within the law; the more money they have, the more anxious they are to keep out of jail to enjoy it. I needed to find some extremely unscrupulous individual. Think of a man with millions willing to ruin and debauch people for the sake of a little more money! No matter what the public thinks of millionaires, there are very few such persons.

"Our agents in New York suspected a certain individual of being connected with the smuggling of the stuff; he was not an addict, but he was seen with the addicts; he had been captured some years ago and given a jail sentence for smuggling opium, now he was living in luxury with no visible source of income.

"It wasn't enough to nab him, because it would be easy to secure other smugglers so long as the capitalist was at large, but we watched him in hope of learning who was his principal. One of our secret agents in New York was Ruth Peterson."

"Ha!" exclaimed Andrews. "Then the kid is all right; that's the way she earned her living."

"She is a very valuable agent and a fine girl."

"You bet."

"She became friendly with this man, went about with him a lot, but she could

not learn anything; he never confided in his women friends. One day, more than a year ago, she was in his apartment when he was called to the phone in another room. While she was waiting the postman came with a special delivery letter. She accepted it and signed for it, just as the man came out of the other room. He saw the letter in her hand and almost snatched it away, but she had read the address and she saw to her astonishment that it was in her father's handwriting."

"For the love of Mike!"

"Naturally the girl did not wish to betray her father, and after all the letter might be quite innocent. She could not secure it, because the man read it in her presence and then burned it up. You must understand she had good reason to hate her father; he practically had killed her mother, starved her, and drove her from home. She had seen the dreadful results of the drug traffic, hated it, of course, and she was a government employee. She did her duty.

"I immediately began to investigate Peterson. I found that he had achieved a fortune by contemptible methods; he had no heart, no feelings; he had cheated and lied and swindled, done everything except commit a crime for which he could be punished; and in recent years his craving for money had become a mania.

"With no facts at all, I figured out that such a man was capable of embarking in a business which paid a thousand per cent on the investment; he had always taken risks. Drug peddling was safer and easier than bootlegging; the profits were infinitely greater, but it took more money. Living a retired life in a small village, he would be immune from suspicion. It was only a hunch, but I thought he would bear investigation.

"As you know, watching a man in a small town is a very different proposition from shadowing somebody in a big city. A stranger is an object of suspicion, and if Peterson was doing wrong he would be very suspicious. I needed a resident of the town, somebody who was intelligent and alert and courageous and needed the money."

"Enter Bill Phillips."

"Exactly. I found the boy working in a garage, but he was a college man, obviously honest and upright, and having a hard time. I found that he hated Peterson, who had ruined his father and who had induced him to work in a disgraceful business, as a result of which he had a fight with the old man, who had him arrested and fined.

"Phillips became my representative in Miltville. Then I set various financial agents to work to investigate Peterson's financial situation. We found that for several years he had been turning his securities into cash; not only that, but he was raising money on property he owned by mortgages and not using the money for reinvestment.

"As he had to pay six per cent for mortgage loans, it was obvious that a man of his type would not do such a thing unless he was making a very large profit. I discovered that his resources seemed to have been much larger than anybody had imagined, and it looked as though he were using as working liquid capital in some unknown enterprise, close to a million dollars.

"Aside from the address on the envelope to the man in New York we still had no evidence that Peterson had anything to do with the opium ring, but we had enough suspicious circumstances to make it worth while watching him.

"Some months ago we got a lucky break. The old man was visiting a debtor about a mile out of town, and was walking home in the early evening, when he was set upon by two tramps who had heard rumors that he carried money on his person. Phillips happened along, fell upon the tramps, beat them up, picked up the old man, brushed him off, and walked home with him.

"Evidently Peterson had a large sum on his person, because he was very grateful, insisted upon shaking hands with Phillips, and promised to remember him in his will. If he hadn't been working for me, I suppose the boy would have refused his thanks and made off, but he remembered his duty, so he apologized to Peterson for the hard things he had said and done some years be-

fore, and they parted friends. Just as they were leaving Peterson asked him if he would like to make some money, and Phillips assented.

"'I'm an old man, can't get around as much as I used to,' he whined. 'I could send you on errands for me. You've got a car, haven't you? I'd pay you something.'

"'Just let me know,' Phillips told him. 'I'll help you any way I can.'

"That was our entering wedge. The old man sent him over to Oakdale several times with letters and packages, which the boy delivered without question. Gradually he gained the miser's confidence as much as anybody could. Once Peterson astonished Phillips by giving him five dollars for services.

"A number of times he called Phillips and asked him to taxi persons over from Oakdale and even Worcester, bring them to his house and take them home under cover of darkness, and for these services he paid him, not well, but liberally for a man like that.

"Bill listened whenever possible, spied when he could upon these interviews; occasionally he heard acrimonious discussions, but he got little information of value. He tried to convince the old man that he was a careless, reckless fellow, chafing against hard work and small pay, and eager to make money any way he could get it; and in time this attitude bore fruit.

"Upon one occasion Peterson handed him casually a small wooden box wrapped in brown paper, and asked him to deliver it to a man named Wompers in a certain room in the Bancroft Hotel, Worcester. Phillips took the box to his home, and opened it, thinking perhaps to find a shipment of opium or cocaine.

"To his astonishment, it contained bank notes; he counted them, and there were eighteen thousand dollars in the package. He got me on long distance, and asked what to do, whereupon I wired our agent in Worcester to shadow Wompers, and told Bill to repack the money and deliver it; there was no crime in giving away money, even in a wooden box covered by brown paper.

"Wompers gave him a receipt in a sealed envelope, then dodged our man and disappeared, but the safe delivery of this box encouraged Peterson to send him on similar errands."

"Crafty old devil!" laughed Andrews. "He didn't think Phillips would dream that he was giving away anything more valuable than soap or shoe polish."

"This phase of the game puzzled us," continued Otis. "You see, Peterson apparently never received the stuff; it just looked as if he were throwing good money into the ambient atmosphere, and that was not his nature. But we afterward discovered that delivery was being made for every payment, and the Peterson storehouse was the cellar of the vacant house on Pine Street."

"So that's why they set it on fire!"

"That's one of the reasons. In these days of fast motor cars, with State highroads, and machines burning through country villages at all hours of the night, there can be all sorts of traffic in a small town without the inhabitants making discoveries. The drug machines did not even stop most of the time.

"They would slow up, toss a packet over the fence into the front yard at Pine Street, and old Peterson would be on hand to pick it up. Take a town like Miltville, with about two policemen on duty at night, and these sticking around the station house; at 10 P.M. everybody is asleep; from ten to five next morning everything in the world can happen in the outlying districts without anybody being the wiser.

"Even Phillips did not suspect the small-hour traffic for a long time; and he did not dream that the Pine Street vacant house was being used. To make a long story short, Peterson paid in advance for the stuff to the smugglers, and sold it to the peddlers in smaller lots for four or five times what it cost him. He did it all himself, had no confederates in town, and Heaven knows when he slept, because he was up and around all day and apparently always on the job at night.

"One day he sent for Phillips and told him that he had become very fond of him. He said his children were worthless, he had no heirs, and he had decided to make this

boy, who had saved his life, the inheritor of his fortune.

" He flashed a will on the astonished Phillips, who could hardly believe his eyes as he read it, and the old man apologized for leaving five hundred dollars each to his son and daughter, on the ground that it would prevent them from breaking the will.

" Bill thanked him, with the mental reservation not to accept the inheritance if the old man was on the level, which he did not believe. He waited for the proposition which was sure to follow. Bill noticed that he put the will back in the breast pocket of his jacket, which was already bulging with papers. So far as he knew, there was no safe on the premises; anything of value was carried on Peterson's person."

" Seems to me Peterson was pretty trustful," objected Andrews. " I can't imagine him paying those crooks in advance and getting the stuff the way you say."

" It paid them to be on the level with him, and they knew it; he was the only customer who could afford to buy in large quantities, and he reduced the risk they ordinarily ran; he was the goose that laid their golden egg."

" Yet I suppose it was those fellows who killed him."

" Because Peterson wasn't playing fair with them. I'm not taking the time to tell you how we got all our information—it would take too long—but this is what happened. He began to complain that he could not sell the stuff as fast as it was coming in, and he cut the prices he was paying the smugglers.

" Then he raised prices on the peddlers, and began to accumulate a horde of narcotics to be thrown on the market when he had succeeded in lifting the retail price to a much higher figure.

" Of course, the smugglers and the peddlers soon found out what he was doing, and they began to make threats. Peterson defied them, but he was afraid, just the same, and he let it be known that his hoard was safely hidden and he had compiled a list of all persons connected with the trade, which would be turned over to the government in case anything happened to him.

" This, in a sense, tied their hands. They were wild to get his supply of drugs worth several hundred thousand dollars, but the only way they could get it would be by finding out from him where it was hidden, and if they injured him there was the list which would send them all to jail.

" Peterson had cultivated Phillips because he felt he might need a body guard and an alert, intelligent lieutenant, and he thought he would bind Bill to his interest by showing him a will in his favor.

" Meanwhile I had discovered from other sources the situation which existed; Peterson had cornered the supply of dope, he was still the best market for the smugglers, he was doling it out to the peddlers at much higher prices, and his profits were going to be enormous.

" If we could lay our hands upon that list and the hoard of opium, we could completely smash the organization for selling dope. The knowledge that he was prepared to betray them, that they were in his power, made it important for the drug ring to get the list before they bumped him off.

" I instructed Phillips to play Peterson's game, and during the next few weeks he ran about at night, delivering packages of dope, purchasing the stuff for large sums, collecting from peddlers whom he met in neighboring towns, taking an active part in the traffic. We got evidence enough against Peterson to send him away, but we wanted the list and the hoard.

" The check for ten thousand dollars which Peterson gave Bill a few days before his death was to be turned into cash in Boston and should have been certified by the Miltville Bank; but Bill forgot to have that done, and as he had to have the cash he came to me with the check, and I indorsed it. Peterson would have covered it all right had he lived, and I think he made a mistake in his balance at the Miltville Bank; for he had supposed there was enough to cover it when presented for certification.

" The very day I indorsed the check I got a tip that there was to be a descent upon the Peterson place and an attempt to force the old man to give up the list and confess where the stuff was hidden. Bill

was convinced that he carried the information on his person. In the emergency I sent for Ruth Peterson, and asked her if she would undertake to enter her father's house and get us the papers.

"I met her the day before the murder, and we got into the barn after dark that night. As I figured we might have a long wait, I took some refreshments in a bag."

"Krug 1913," grinned Andrews.

"Bought before prohibition. I confess a weakness for good wine."

CHAPTER XXV.

FOUR SHOTS.

"PHILLIPS was with us part of the time, although he was supposed to be out of town on an errand for Peterson. I figured that about eleven o'clock would be right for our attempt, but to our astonishment Peterson had visitors who drove into the yard and remained with him until five in the morning. We thought we would wait an hour to give the old man a chance to sleep, when, to our surprise, he came outdoors fully dressed and went toward the town.

"Phillips hastened away then, while Ruth and I remained all day in the barn. That night about ten thirty Ruth slipped out to the house. During all these years she had retained the key to the front door. She entered without trouble, went up to her father's room, and bundled up the clothes which lay on a chair, crept noiselessly out, and was going downstairs when she heard somebody enter the house. She ran up to the second floor again, and waited, while the visitor went right to her father's room and knocked on the door.

"She heard her father call; then she saw him turn on the light, and the man entered the room. She watched her chance, and after four or five minutes managed to get downstairs unheard, and out of the front door.

"She had almost reached the barn, when she heard four shots fired from her father's room. The child had a narrow escape, for one of the bullets went wide, passed through the window, and struck the ground not far from where she stood, first having penetrated the breast of her father's coat, which was dangling from her arm."

"So that's how that happened!" exclaimed Andrews.

"Phillips and I ran out of the barn when we heard the shots fired, and the boy dashed into the house. I saw the murderer come out of the back door, shouted to Bill and gave chase, but he got clean away. I didn't have a weapon."

"You're a hell of a detective!" grinned Andrews.

"Phillips rushed into the bedroom and found Peterson groaning on the floor.

"'Who shot you, Mr. Peterson?' he demanded.

"'So you're in with them?' muttered Peterson. 'You're supposed to be in Oakdale.'

"'Tell me who killed you. Let me bring him to justice,' urged Bill. 'I'm a representative of the government, Mr. Peterson. I've been working for them right along. Give me the list and I'll send the whole collection to jail!'

"He should have had more sense than say a thing like that, but he was half crazy to see the man dying before his eyes. Peterson began to curse him for a traitor and a crook.

"'You'll never get my money, you spy,' he said. 'I tore up that will right after I showed it to you.'

"Poor Bill saw it was no use talking to him, and remembering that the murderer was somewhere about ran excitedly downstairs and into the yard, where he met me returning from my wild-goose chase.

"'Go back and telephone for a doctor,' I told him. Bill went upstairs again, and just as he reached the door he heard Peterson on the telephone telling central that he was murdered by Bill Phillips."

"The revengeful old villain!" exclaimed Andrews.

"Bill rushed into the room, but the old man died at once, and the phone fell out of his hands. The boy was scared then, and came running back to me. Meanwhile Ruth had gone through her father's clothes and didn't find any documents of any sort, nor money or keys. We expected the local po-

lice on the scene immediately, and there was no sense remaining.

" So Bill rolled up the clothes and tucked them away in the haymow, we went over the back fence to Pine Street, got into Bill's car, made connections with a New York express at Worcester, and put Ruth on board. I told Bill to abandon his car and take a train for Canada, and I went back to Boston."

" I don't get your reasons for acting like that after the crime."

" Don't you see we hadn't achieved our objects. We didn't have the list nor the hiding place. It was a good break to have Bill accused of the crime because the crooks did not have to fear detection. We were sure that the murderer hadn't secured anything, probably killed in a fit of passion induced by drugs—lots of them use their own dope—and fled the scene without making a search of any sort.

" If he had got the information from Peterson he wouldn't have shot him. But with Peterson dead, the house empty, an innocent man being pursued for the murder, they would be sure to come back, and then we could nab them.

" Ruth, as the daughter of the murdered man, could return at once and move right into the house if she wanted to, but if she did the crooks might be kept away. So she insisted upon going to a hotel, and her fool of a brother was afraid to live there alone. Then you crossed us by putting a police guard on the place. And Bill was captured and brought back to Oakdale.

" As he had been dealing with a lot of these dopesters I needed him to identify them, and jail was no place for him. On the other hand, there was the dying statement of Peterson to convict him of the crime, and Ruth and I should have been compelled to come into the open and confess our business to clear him."

" I get that."

" You're beginning to see why I couldn't take you into my confidence immediately."

" I suppose so. I'm certainly glad to know about the old man's clothes, and how they happened to be in the barn with a bullet hole in them when he was shot with his nightshirt on."

" All right. It seems they came back two nights ago when you blundered in on them, and they tied you up, but you frightened them away. I knew they would return.

" As I was Phillips's attorney, that enabled me to come here without creating suspicion, but the publicity received by Ruth, the identification of Ruth Rector, who was chummy with members of the underworld in New York as the daughter of Peterson, the murdered man, drew the eyes of the crooks to her as one who might know his secrets.

" You can bet they found out she wasn't in New York for a couple of days before the murder, and they undoubtedly traced her here. I was afraid they might try to force information from her which is why I suggested that you lock her up to-night."

" Fine idea," growled Andrews. " Now what happened to you two to-night?"

" We took up our quarters in the barn, and watched. About nine o'clock we saw two men cross the grounds and go over the back fence toward the house on Pine Street. We followed. They got into the house, and through the boards in the basement windows we saw chinks of light. We slipped around to the front, found the basement door open, and got inside. In the cellar at the back we found these fellows digging up the floor, and we jumped them. There was a fight, two more came up on us from behind, and we got put out of business.

" One of them covered us with a revolver while the others went on with their investigations. They worked for hours, it seemed, to us without results; you can be sure there was nothing hidden in that house. About eleven o'clock a fifth man arrived."

" That must have been West."

" I didn't know him, but he recognized me and told the others. They had a consultation in another room, and then they returned and West, if that's his name, pulled out a bottle of chloroform and proceeded to dope us. That's all I remember until I woke up on the ground outside and saw you."

" They locked you in the basement, and set the house on fire," explained Andrews. " Phillips evidently came to first, and be-

gan to bang against the boards covering the window. I heard him, and that's why you are both alive."

"Rather inglorious," said Otis bitterly.

"Now that I have all the facts I can get busy," said Andrews. "Let me describe West. About five feet eight, very dark, ears that stick out, a stub nose, big mouth, one gold tooth at left."

"That's the man who came in last."

"He's a Boston water front crook. Ever hear of him?"

"No."

"Well, we'll nab him to-morrow in Boston and sweat him. Don't worry, but we'll get some facts out of him. The important thing now is to get the girl out of their hands. Having set fire to the Pine Street house and ransacked the Peterson place I don't think they'll be back right away. Would you know the men who were in the cellar?"

"Yes, I think so."

"The government has a lot of suspects, dope peddlers, and smugglers?"

"Suspects, yes. Not much evidence."

"Don't need it. Round them all up on suspicion, and pick out the fellows that tried to murder you. Did Ruth get a look at the man who killed her father? Would she know him again?"

"It was dark on the stairs and in the hall; she couldn't see him clearly."

"But you chased him?"

"Yes, but it was very dark. I didn't see his face."

"Mark my words; we'll have that gang in short order whether we ever find that list or not. Perhaps the old man never made a list."

"I think he did. He was very vindictive."

"Yep, when he would accuse, with his dying breath, an innocent man of killing him. Probably he did make a list, but he was too wise to carry it on his person because all they would have to do would be to murder him and rob the body; depend upon it the list was hidden somewhere, probably in the same place with the supply of dope. How large a bundle would half a million dollars' worth of dope amount to, a few tons?"

"Good Heavens, no, a few hundred pounds!"

"Well, he either dug a hole and buried it or—wait a minute."

"What?"

"Never mind now; I just had a crazy idea, time enough to look into it if I'm right. He used to prowl around at all kinds of strange hours you say. Left the house at five in the morning the day he was murdered."

"Yes."

"Well, let's find Ruth. These brutes might torture her. Any idea where they would be apt to take her?"

"None."

"These automobiles have raised the deuce with sleuthing," complained the detective. "In the days of horses you could figure on a small radius, ten or fifteen miles, but with a motor car they might have gone a hundred miles in any direction, and that means Boston or New York."

"A needle in a haystack."

"Yep. What do you know about this lawyer, Finch?"

"Nothing much."

"Did Phillips know anything about him. Was he in the gang?"

"Not so far as we know."

"Well, he's a crook; I can tell by looking at him, and you bet he knows more than he admits. I'm going to drop in on him soon and throw a scare into him. You see—"

The ringing of the telephone bell interrupted him. Otis answered.

"It's Phillips," he said to the detective.

"I want to see him. It's not safe for him to come into town. Tell him to get on the road toward Oakdale near his own house, and I'll pick him up there in half an hour."

Otis passed on the instructions, then rang off.

"Kind of a raw deal on his mother and his sweetheart letting him be accused of murder," commented the officer.

"I told his mother the facts when I arrived here yesterday, and he slipped off to-night to tell Miss Litchfield."

"Nearly got shot by Chief Easton," chuckled Andrews.

"He told me about it. I didn't give the local police credit for so much alertness."

"They were tipped off by young Peterson, otherwise they never would have got on the trail. Do you feel well enough to take a ride?"

"I'm all right now. Where are we going."

"I don't know. I want to pick up Phillips and hear his story. The car that carried off Ruth went toward Oakdale; we might run down there on spec."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A COLLISION—AND A MINCE PIE.

THE two men went out to the garage and picked up Andrews's flivver, and were soon bumping along on the Oakdale road. In five minutes they arrived in front of the Phillips cottage, and a man detached himself from the shadows and approached cautiously.

"Bill," whispered Otis.

"All right," called the stranger, who immediately climbed into the car.

"You've met Officer Andrews?"

"I had the pleasure the other day," said the big fellow. "How are you, Mr. Andrews? And much obliged for rescuing Otis and an unknown man to-night."

"Come in the front seat, kid," said Andrews. "Say, I liked you that day in the jail, and I had a hunch all along that you didn't do the job. And it was me that bumped into the old chief to-night, or he might have winged you in Litchfield's garden."

"That makes twice you've saved my life," laughed Phillips. "It's getting to be a habit."

"We are looking for Ruth Peterson. They broke into the jail and carried her off to-night."

"I'm terribly sorry. Any idea where they took her?"

"Nope. I want a talk with you, and we'll run down to Oakdale to put up for the night. I want a talk with this lawyer, Finch, in the morning."

"The police of Oakdale are after me."

"If we meet any of them I'll say I have arrested you and am returning you to jail. You might as well give yourself up; Otis and Miss Peterson can prove your innocence."

"I'm willing. If I had stayed there I wouldn't have come so near roasting to death to-night."

They jogged along easily for an hour, passed through Oakdale without stopping as Andrews was going over with Bill all the events of the night of the murder, asking scores of questions. Andrews was so absorbed that he was driving carelessly; the auto worked over to the middle of the road and edged a trifle to the left side, and then a big car swung out of a driveway, turned to the right and came within a few inches of smashing head on into the flivver. Andrews jammed on his brake and the man in the big car did likewise, but the bumper of the latter tore the left front fender from the flivver.

As the big car stopped the driver leaned out, and there issued from his mouth a string of profanity that Hank Andrews could not have approached in eloquence and patness. It was to the effect that of all the drunken sots who ever was erroneously intrusted with a driving license, the driver of the flivver was the greatest. Andrews was about to reply in kind when Phillips grasped his right arm tightly.

"Let him go; don't let him see me," he whispered.

Andrews kept silent, whereupon the big car started and roared off up the road.

"Who is he?" asked the detective.

"It's a man named Wompers. He had dealings with Peterson. I delivered cash to him half a dozen times."

"Who's Wompers, Otis?" demanded the detective.

"He's a dope smuggler," replied the lawyer, leaning forward from the back seat.

"One of the gang." Andrews whistled, then started his car, and ran along for a hundred yards, when he stopped at the edge of the road under a clump of trees.

"What's the idea?" demanded Otis.

"Want to find out who Mr. Wompers was calling on in Oakdale. Looks like the home of a substantial citizen."

Andrews got out. "You fellers wait for

me. Give me ten minutes, then come after me," he suggested. "Better make it half an hour."

"Let me go with you," proposed Phillips.

"You fellers are too unlucky," chuckled Andrews. "Stay right where you are."

He strolled leisurely along the sidewalk while Phillips looked after him, and thought how curious it was that such an alert and daring soul should dwell in that stout, heavy, stupid-looking body.

As Andrews approached the house he saw a light in a bedroom on the farther corner of it, second floor, and then it went out. There was a dim light burning in the hallway; the rest of the house was dark. He passed along the driveway and slithered up the porch, then grinned as he made out a nameplate upon the white front door; it was going to be a simple matter to find out who dwelt in this comfortable residence.

He approached the nameplate and saw engraved in bold letters on brass, "Henry Finch, Attorney at Law." He whistled soundlessly in his surprise. The crafty lawyer whom he had intended to put over the jumps in the morning resided in this mansion, and had just been receiving a call from Mr. Wompers, no less. Mr. Finch, then, was acquainted with the dope smuggler, and knew a lot more about the secret business of his late client than he had ever admitted.

To Andrews it was evident that he ought to enter this house. Who knew what valuable documents might be concealed within, perhaps the celebrated list, the missing will, the mortgages, and titles that should have been in Peterson's safe-deposit boxes. To ring the front doorbell and wake Mr. Finch up seemed very inconsiderate; Andrews knew something about entering houses without the knowledge of their owners, so he left the porch and went around to the back of the house, where he inspected the kitchen windows with the aid of the flash light which always traveled with him.

Upon one of the window sills was a plate covered with another plate, which he lifted down and inspected. Beneath the cover was a very attractive looking, freshly baked pie, placed outside the window by the cook to cool, and forgotten. Andrews loved pie, particularly mince pie, which he recognized by the slits in the top crust. He remembered that he was hungry, therefore he tore off a wedge and ate it with relish. It was very good pie.

However, he was not greedy; he left half the pie, inspected the window fastening which turned out to be old-fashioned; and then, with the blade of his knife, he reached the catch through the badly fitting sash, and pushed it aside, after which he lifted the window sash, stood upon an ash can, and dragged himself inside.

He found himself in a very neat kitchen. He nodded approvingly; evidently Mr. Finch was well taken care of. Despite his bulk, Andrews was as noiseless as a cat when on the sleuth. He passed through a pantry into a dining room, and then arrived in a room which seemed to be used as an office. It contained a safe, the door of which he tried, but Mr. Finch had not been accommodating enough to leave it open, and Andrews was not proficient in the art of opening safes.

He sighed regretfully; undoubtedly any important papers would be locked in the safe. Then he played his light around the room, saw a little ball of white under a chair on the farther side of the desk, picked it up, and smoothed it out. It was a six-inch square of linen with the letter "P" on the corner, a duplicate of the handkerchief which he had found in Peterson's chamber and which he believed, despite her denial, to belong to Ruth.

His heart was bouncing inside his barrel chest as he pressed the kerchief to his nose. The scent was not the same as on the other piece of linen, but Ruth had undoubtedly changed her perfume when she discovered she had lost the first kerchief. What a careless girl she was, dropping handkerchiefs was a vice with her.

Unable to believe his luck, Andrews gazed at the pretty little sheet of fine cloth; for it indicated to him that the girl he wanted, but for whom he did not know how to begin his search, either had been or was now in this house. To think that he had blundered right upon the hiding place!

If he had not been careless and got on

the wrong side of the road the other car would have passed unnoticed. If Bill Phillips had not recognized the driver when he thrust his head out to cuss, they would not have known that he was a drug smuggler; and in that case it would not have occurred to Andrews to investigate this house any more than any other house in Massachusetts. So the dear girl was hidden in this house, unless she had been taken away in that machine. No, he remembered that there had been no one in the big car except the driver.

Mr. Finch had figured in the jail breaking of Miltville as well as the entertaining of Mr. Wompers; in that case Andrews need not bother about his attitude if he were caught snooping around the place.

He made a careful tour of the other rooms on the ground floor, but found nothing interesting, and then he climbed the stairs. One step creaked, but it did not seem to alarm anybody, so he continued until he stood in the upper hallway. There were four rooms on this floor, one of which seemed to be occupied by Mr. Finch, and that he gave a wide berth. The doors of the others were unlocked. He peered into three bedrooms, which were unoccupied.

The third floor remained, and now he removed his shoes before he essayed the stairs, but it was a solid oak stairway and did not creak or groan beneath his two hundred pounds.

He went up the stairs in the dark, was about to turn on his flash when he heard a cough, which seemed to come from above —there was somebody here and awake. He paused and listened intently, a very faint radiance came through a window at the end of the hall, and as his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness he saw that there were three rooms on this floor, and another stairs, which seemed to lead to an attic.

Then he heard a faint, but unmistakable sound, somewhere a woman was sobbing—Ruth, of course, but where? Not on this floor, probably in the attic. Without the slightest noise he crept around, guiding himself by the stair rail until he was at the foot of the stairs to the fourth floor, when he saw the starlike glitter of a cigarette. Somebody was sitting at the head of the stairs smoking a cigarette.

Suddenly there was a squeal—a woman's voice, groaned: "O-o-o-o!" and then a bass growled: "Shut up in there! Do you hear?"

Andy had to have action; he drew his gun, shifted his flash to his left hand and suddenly turned it on, pointed up the stairs. It lit up the astonished countenance of a man who was sitting on the top step, his legs crossed, his back against a closed door, with a lighted cigarette between his teeth. The light blinded him for a second; he could not see anything except the bull's-eye.

"You're under arrest! Get your hands over your head, quick!" said Andrews in a low, tense tone. The man on the stairs obeyed without hesitation, whereupon Andrews climbed quickly and thrust his gun under the man's nose.

"Open that door," he commanded.

"The key is in the lock."

"Open it."

As the captive turned to obey, Andrews touched his hip pocket, felt a weapon, and yanked it out of its resting place.

The door opened upon a black attic, whereupon Andrews thrust the man in ahead of him and swung his flash around. A dozen feet in, lying upon the floor of the unfurnished den, her eyes wide with fright, her face as pale as death, was Ruth. She saw only the light, supposed her enemies were coming for her, and shrank away.

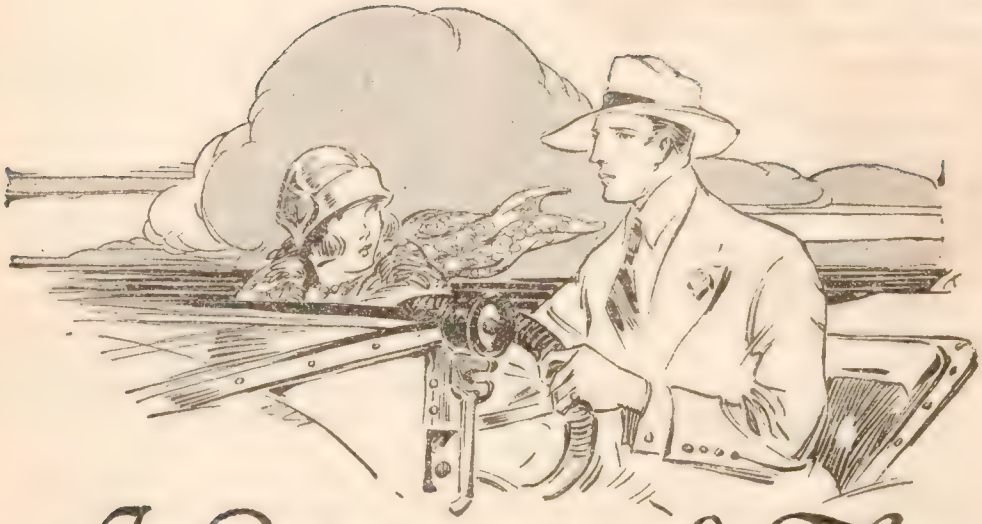
"Don't be afraid, Ruth," said the detective. "It's Andrews."

With an ejaculation of joy the girl sprang to her feet and precipitated herself upon him, knocking the light out of his hand.

"Thank Heaven! Oh, I knew you'd come!" she exclaimed. At the same moment he felt two soft arms creep around his neck, and two soft lips pressed against his rough cheek. It was such a new sensation for Andrews that his professional caution deserted him for a second, long enough for his prisoner to dart past him, slam the door shut, and lock it on the outside.

"Oh!" moaned Ruth. "Now they've got you, too, and it's my fault!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



A Start at the Top

By ERIC HOWARD

"I'LL take the apartment," smiled the handsome young man. Placing his gleaming malacca stick beside his hat on the rental agent's desk, he removed the yellow chamois glove from his right hand, drew out a check book, and filled in a check. This he handed to the beaming agent.

"That's right, Mr. Gould, quite right! The first and the last month, on a six months' lease. Yes, three hundred a month. I'm happy to welcome you to Hollywood, very happy. Are you—is it your plan—that is, if you don't mind a well-intentioned personal question—are you planning perhaps to go into business? Or the profession? Perhaps you're in the pictures, but I'm a great fan, and I don't remember your face."

"No," said Norman Gould to himself, "not even the greatest of fans would remember me, considering the parts they used to give me!" Aloud he said, with a bland smile: "I really don't know yet. Father—you see, my father wants me to represent him abroad, but I thought I should like a winter here, at least."

The way he said it would have led any one—and it certainly did lead the rental agent—to believe that his father must have been one of the famous wealthy Goulds. As a matter of fact, however, he was not even their distant relative; Norman Gould's father was the owner of a little hardware store in a small Western town.

Norman, by no means ashamed of his parentage, was at the same time eager to create another impression. Whether it was the ease of his bearing, or the suit of magnificent tweeds, he succeeded without difficulty.

"If," said the agent, Mr. Burroughs—"if you are interested in real estate, I could show you some splendid opportunities."

"Thank you," responded young Mr. Gould. "After I look around a bit, I may be."

Inwardly he chuckled. Real estate! Good Lord, he couldn't buy a vacant lot large enough for a dog kennel in this town

of amazing real estate values. That reminded him that he had other things to do. He shook hands with Mr. Burroughs and picked up his malacca stick.

"If I can be of any service," suggested the realtor almost sycophantically, "please let me know."

"I shall!" Norman agreed heartily. "And thank you!"

"Thank *you!*" beamed Mr. Burroughs.

Young Mr. Gould remained in character until he had walked half a block down Hollywood Boulevard. Newcomers — and Hollywood is always full of newcomers— turned to look at him, thinking that they had seen Shelley—or Reginald Denny, perhaps. The young man, fully conscious of these glances, looked straight ahead, smiling a little to himself. Half a block from the office of Mr. Burroughs he burst into a laugh.

"It can be done!" he muttered to himself. "I wouldn't have believed it, but it can be done! Barnum was not only right—he was a profound philosopher. If I had only known all this before!"

Despite the business that was then occupying his thoughts, his mind reverted to his former sojourns in the capital of filmdom. Twice before young Mr. Gould had attempted to storm the studio gates; twice had he failed.

This time he was going to succeed. If he failed again, he would return to the town of his birth, take his stand behind his father's counter, and sell screwdrivers, nails, and tacks.

Maybe he was an idiot, he reflected, to make this last attempt. Perhaps he was foolish to send good money, hoarded through the year, after bad. But— He squared his shoulders and resumed the smile that had conquered Mr. Burroughs. It worked! He'd crash those gates this time or know the reason why.

On the previous occasions when he had spent some time—wasted it, rather—in Hollywood, Norman Gould had played an altogether different rôle. Fresh from the stock companies in which he had been cast as a juvenile, he had attempted to become a cinema celebrity.

It was his naïve idea, at that time, that he need only call upon casting directors, a batch of photographs under his arm, and that he would be chosen to play opposite Mary Pickford, Norma Talmadge, and Gloria Swanson. Or at least he would be given a minor part, offered a chance to show what he could do, and then advanced to important rôles.

But not so! Nothing of the kind had happened. Instead, he had been grudgingly taken on as an extra, at five dollars a day, mostly in slapstick comedies. The jobs never endured for longer than a week, and during the intervals between jobs Norman was compelled to economize.

Besides, his hopes vanished when he saw himself so fleetingly on the screen that he was sure no one else had even glimpsed him. How could he ever become a well-known, high-salaried leading man if no one saw him? Whatever histrionic talent he possessed—and if he wasn't specially talented, at least he had the advantage of three years' training in stock—would be ignored and overlooked.

Norman, a wiser and a poorer boy, went back to stock. Luckily for him, the leading man of his company staged a debate with the boss. As is often the case, the boss won, the leading man departed, and Norman stepped into his shoes. His salary was raised to the munificent sum of two hundred dollars a week as he won popularity with the theatergoers.

For a full year, with a stubborn determination that not even flattery could break down, Norman saved one-half of his money each week and laid his plans for a renewed attack upon Hollywood. So bent upon saving was he that he wore the same suits of clothes throughout the fifty-two weeks —wore them in farce, comedy, drama, and melodrama, as *Jimmie Valentine* and as the *Gay Lord Quex*.

Cohen, who owned the theater, objected. But Norman was resolute.

"Can't afford any clothes," he insisted. "Give me more money or get me credit at the tailor's. I can't pay for 'em."

So he appeared in the clothes he had. Not until he had arrived in Los Angeles had he ordered new suits. Then, lying low and inconspicuous in a part of the city that

had not been touched by the motion pictures, he waited for Valentino's personal tailor, not easily persuaded to take the commission, to do him justice.

The result was impressive. It even impressed Hollywood Boulevard, than which there is no more blasé street in America. Yet in the heart of sophistication there nearly always lurks simplicity. Sometimes it is more than simplicity—sometimes it is idiocy. For instance—Norman could think of many instances.

"Now for the car!" murmured Norman, as he strolled along. "A low, rakish craft it must be—and colorful besides, but not loud. Imported, too—there aren't many of 'em. Well, let's see."

He turned into a spacious showroom. There were a dozen shining motor cars on the floor, and an equal number of salesmen.

Norman strolled in and stood before a car that seemed to him just the thing. It was an imported roadster, of English manufacture, worth fifteen thousand new. A glance at the speedometer showed him that it had been run only ten thousand miles.

"It's good for two hundred thousand at least," he said to himself. "Now if they don't want too much, I—"

This establishment owed its success to the fact that newly rich motion picture and oil people—and there were many of both classes in Hollywood—quickly grew tired of expensive playthings. After driving a car like this for ten thousand miles, they were likely to hear of another make that pleased them more. Then they would place this car on sale, at a sacrifice, and buy a new one.

The company had taken advantage of the childishness of the newly rich, and was doing very well, thank you. Also, of course, they bought first-class cars from those who suddenly discovered that they could not afford them.

That limousine over there, for instance, had belonged to Fay Langdon. She had bought it when she first signed her name to the contract that was to net her five thousand dollars a week. A month later the company broke the contract, and Fay sold the car.

Norman had chosen the right place to buy a machine. After ignoring the salesman for the proper length of time, he turned to ask:

"How much is it?"

"Five thousand. And a bargain. Completely reconditioned. Absolutely guaranteed. And we'll look after it for you for a year."

"I'll take it," said Norman, as you or I might say we would take a package of cigarettes.

The salesman, who had gone through a course in salesmanship and lost no opportunity to put it into practice, almost gasped. The sale was too easy.

"Yes, sir," he nodded. "Terms or cash?"

"Cash," said Norman, and paused. Then, as if an afterthought had come to him: "Let me see—what are the terms?"

"Ten per cent down, the rest in monthly payments over a year—eighteen months if you prefer. Six per cent interest, and no brokerage."

"That's fair. Yes, I'll buy it on terms. My name's Gould." He paused dramatically. "Norman Gould. My address is Garden Vista Apartments."

The salesman lifted his brows. He knew Garden Vista; he knew what it cost to live there.

"Yes, Mr. Gould!" he nodded. Then he introduced Norman to the manager, who was equally impressed.

Within fifteen minutes Norman had made out another check, signed a few papers, and was driving the car out of the place. At the first corner a traffic cop greeted him with a friendly smile, conferring an admiring glance upon the car.

If Norman had been stared at as he walked down the boulevard, he was now, to use the old phrase, the cynosure of all eyes. There were only three other cars of this make and model in use in Hollywood at this time.

Jack Dempsey drove one, Douglas Fairbanks another, and Tom Mix the third. Among traffic cops and other boulevardiers Norman took his place as number four of this select circle.

At the wheel of the great machine Nor-

man smiled. He had tried, before, the old way of beginning at the bottom and working up. Now, if you please, he would try starting at the top. He had good reason and sound authority for his plan.

In Hollywood, as elsewhere, nothing succeeds like success.

II.

Observe, if you will, young Mr. Gould at home. He lounged in an overstuffed chair, beside a wide, pleasant window that overlooked a garden, arrayed in a gray silk dressing-gown copied from one the Prince of Wales had worn. He was reading the press notices he had already received.

He had not sought publicity, but sometimes the best way to get it is not to seek it. The rental agent, thinking to make Garden Vista even more exclusive, had secured one of Norman's photographs and had had it inserted in the papers with an item that stated why he had chosen to live there. It gave the impression that he might have chosen to buy a home in Beverly Hills, but that Garden Vista was even more desirable.

The automobile company had also had him photographed with his car, and he had graciously allowed himself to be interviewed. He stated clearly why he had selected that car; it was a rare boost.

Following this natural publicity, a young newspaperman, seeking to increase his inadequate income by writing articles about the pictures for the magazines devoted to them, had sought an interview. Norman paid him one hundred dollars for writing the article, which was contributed gratis to the publication.

It occupied two full pages, with a group of photographs, and it mentioned Norman Gould as the newest, youngest of Hollywood's potential stars. The writer suggested that Mr. Gould was being considered by the greatest of all producers for the leading part in the year's biggest and best production.

Inasmuch as some ten other actors were being so considered, it did no harm to suggest it. At least twenty actresses were going to play *Peter Pan,* according to similar articles, before the producers settled the matter by assigning the rôle to Betty Bronson.

The impression was conveyed, in everything written about him, that Norman Gould had come from a long series of stage triumphs, at the urgent demand of motion picture producers, to lend his handsome presence to the silver screen.

Norman chuckled to himself. This was a good beginning. Publicity would accomplish wonders. He recalled his earlier experiences in Hollywood; he had been unseen and unsung and unsought. Now, if he was not famous, his face and his name were being favorably impressed upon the minds of producers and directors.

A good many highly paid players had been made in this way; with his acting ability to go on, and the bluff to give him a start, he would go far. Pretty good, he reflected.

The telephone rang. His agent was on the wire. He had, of course, put himself in the hands of an agent. An artist could not be annoyed by business details. And the agent had been almost as much impressed as the real estate man, except that, as he figured it, Norman must be married to a rich woman.

"'Lo, Norman! Lieder talkin'. Say, one of the producers on Poverty Row—the Royal Films bunch—wants a leading man for a kind of comedy melodrama they're doing. They'll pay a hundred a week; it ought to be good for ten weeks. Do you want it?"

Norman hesitated for just a moment. His expenses were high; one hundred dollars a week would help to meet them. But, no, he couldn't accept it; it would lessen his prestige.

"Oh, no, old man," he replied. "I really couldn't take that, you know. It isn't the sort of company I care to be with, you see. I might consider three hundred a week and a share in the profits, with my name featured in all advertising. But I couldn't accept anything less."

"All right," said Lieder. "I don't guess they can meet your figure; but I'll tell 'em. I just thought I'd tell you, in case you wanted it."

"Thanks, old chap. But it won't quite do."

For an actor of anything but the greatest renown to reject a cash offer in Hollywood is almost unheard of. Lieder, being an astute agent, let it be known far and wide that the illustrious Norman Gould had done so.

This unpublished bit of publicity perhaps did more to win the respect of casting directors, who ordinarily respect no one, than anything else. They decided that the boy must be good.

There is a young actor of considerable ability and popularity who made a comfortable fortune in oil; since then he works only under the most favorable conditions and for the highest salaries; and he is always in demand. Norman Gould was compared with him.

Yes, nothing succeeded like success. Norman was absolutely confident that before long he would be approached by a great producer and offered an attractive contract. As things were going, there was no good reason to doubt that eventuality.

The only question was, had he enough capital to hold out? There might come a time when he would have to take an offer like the one Lieder had relayed to him. But for the present—

Young Mr. Gould got up, shrugged out of the dressing-gown, and dressed for a drive. At least, he was getting a lot of fun out of the car. It was a great life, while—and if—it lasted.

Half an hour later he turned off the ocean boulevard above Santa Monica, and followed a road that led through a cañon and up to the summit of the hills beyond. From there one could look far out over the Pacific.

It was a view made famous by the descriptions of the realtors. Norman paused to enjoy it for a moment, and as he did so he observed, not far ahead, another car. It was also a roadster of attractive and rakish lines, smaller than his own, a domestic car of the first class.

The girl at its wheel was not enjoying the view. She was, instead, jiggling every instrument on the dashboard in a futile effort to waken the machine to life.

Norman pulled up alongside. The girl glanced up at him, and their recognition was mutual.

"Why," said he, "you're Marie Berri—the accent is on the second syllable, is it not?"

"Sure," smiled Marie. "It's French—see? And you—I know who you are all right. Your article was right next to mine in *The Film Lover*, and, besides, you've been pointed out to me a dozen times. You are Norman Gould. Say, this darned car won't go!"

Marie Berri—both accents on the second syllables, please—frowned, smiled, and looked wistfully helpless all at the same time.

Marie was an actress, perhaps tenth in the ranks of stardom. Her employers were now calling her the queen of the screen. Burlesquing that, a rival had dubbed her the filly of the fillums. But, cattishness aside, Marie had her points and made the most of them.

Norman inspected her machine. Back home, next door to his father's hardware store, there had been a garage. He knew a little about cars.

He found the trouble soon enough. There was a short circuit in the ignition system; he might have repaired it, but Marie was in a hurry.

"I'll take you back to town, then," he offered.

"Oh, would you? That's sweet of you! Some one can come and get it for me."

She was beside him in his own magnificent machine, very small and very pretty and very close to him. She was studying him out of a corner of her eye.

"Do you know," she murmured, "you have a lovely profile? Would you like to play in my next picture?"

He looked at her and smiled. Did I say that he had a very attractive smile?

"I'd love to," he answered.

"You will!" she promised.

III.

WHEN Norman returned to Garden Vista he was informed that a lady was waiting to see him.

"A lady?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said the young man at the desk, a very respectful young man. "She said she was a very old friend of yours."

Norman frowned. He had no past that he was afraid might rise to smite him; neither could he imagine who this lady might be.

There were two girls he had played with in stock who were his good friends; but one of them was in New York, the other in Chicago. Perhaps some one he had known slightly who was looking him up because of the publicity.

He laughed to himself. Things were going beautifully. Marie Berri had promised him the leading part in her next picture. That would be a real part; playing opposite Marie, with his name in letters just a little smaller than hers, would be a great beginning. He'd tell Lieder to hold out for real money, too. Marie's producers had it; they might as well spend it.

The girl who advanced toward him—she had been waiting in a reception room off the entrance hall—was alarmingly beautiful. But Norman could not remember who she was, if he had ever met her. At first he did not believe that he had met her, but there was something about her— But how could he have forgotten her, then?

"Why, Norman Gould," she said, her hand offered, her voice warm and thrilling and friendly, "I don't believe you know me!" Her smile was friendly, too. There was also mockery in it. "And once you told me that you would never forget!"

"But—I—why—I beg your pardon; but am I the Gould you mean? That is, I—you see, I don't see how I could possibly have forgotten you."

"That's better!" she laughed. "I'm Ellen Brown."

"Ellen—Brown! Not Ellen Brown of Arcadia? You're not—you can't be—that nice little freckled, pig-tailed Brown kid! Or are you?"

"I am!" she laughed. "But I haven't any freckles, have I?"

"Not—now!" he gasped. He had taken her hand and was holding it, meanwhile studying her face. He nodded. "Yes, I guess you are Ellen Brown. The same eyes! I should have known you anywhere. But—well, you know, you weren't even grown up when I left home. And you've changed. What are you doing here?"

"Acting. That's why I've come to see you. I've been reading all about you. They say you're a coming star."

Norman laughed a little uneasily, and suggested that they go to his own apartment.

Settled in Norman's living room, which was well worth the rental he was paying, if only as a frame for Ellen Brown's beauty, the girl began to speak with the honesty that prevails between old friends.

"I've always had an idea I could act," she said, "and I've really worked at it. I played a little while in stock at San Diego, and then I did some community theater work here. But I haven't had a bit of luck in pictures. I simply can't get in. How do you go about it?

"You see, when my mother died—perhaps your mother wrote you about it—I was all alone, and I had to do something. There was nothing in Arcadia, so I struck out into the big world. Your success"—at this Norman winced a little—"had something to do with it. Your mother used to read me your letters and show me your pictures in different plays. I always wondered why you didn't try motion pictures. And now you have, and are succeeding just as I knew you would.

"I thought that, for old times' sake, when I used to be your leading lady in the shows we staged in your father's barn, you might give me a tip or two. I certainly need advice because I'm rapidly going broke."

Norman hesitated; then he shrugged and grinned and said:

"So am I, Ellen!"

"You!" She looked around the room. "This doesn't show it."

There was nothing for him to do but tell her the truth. She was the sort of girl whose eyes compelled truth. And Norman, despite the bluff he was putting up—and paying for—was naturally honest.

When he had concluded his story, which involved not only an explanation of his present affluence but also a record of his

earlier attempts to win screen success, Ellen looked thoughtful for a moment, and then she laughed.

"I guess you're right. One has to start at the top or not at all, from what I've seen of starting at the bottom. And I wish you luck, Norman. But—isn't there any other way?"

"There was once, I guess," he replied. "And there's still some chance—one in ten thousand. But it's so rare that it's almost hopeless. I tried to buck it, and got nowhere. Now it seems that I am about to get somewhere. I've been promised a lead in Marie Berri's next production. I'll take you down to my agent. Maybe he can find a part for you."

IV.

THROUGH Lieder, Ellen secured a small part at a small salary in another of the Poverty Row productions—Poverty Row being the headquarters of those fly-by-night producers who beg, borrow or steal enough money to finance one production. She worked at this for several weeks.

Meanwhile, Norman waited for the offer to come from Marie Berri's company. He saw Marie occasionally, took her riding once or twice, to dinner, and to a dance. Always she assured him that his profile was all that it should be, and that she would be proud to have him in her picture.

Norman, enacting the rôle he had written for himself, could not display any eagerness, but he realized that time was passing very rapidly. With it went his money. Neither Cecil de Mille nor Jesse Lasky sought his services; the other large producers seemed capable of getting along without him.

Norman began to worry Lieder. He would telephone every day, at least once, asking if Miss Berri's company had made an offer. They had not. Norman, relying upon Marie's promise, waited confidently but impatiently.

Also, of course, he saw a good deal of Ellen, frequently driving her to or from the studio where she worked. They talked a lot about Arcadia, the pleasant little town where they had grown up.

Norman had not been home for several years, his stock engagements having always taken him far away. He began to feel a desire to go back to the little town. His father was getting old; the store was too much for him.

"I want to go back," he said once, "some time soon."

"I've been often homesick, too," Ellen admitted.

Norman took her hand. "We'll go back together, shall we?" he asked.

They were sitting in the car, up on the highroad overlooking the sea. They were very far from Hollywood. Ellen nodded, and then Norman, suddenly looking into her eyes, realized that nothing mattered much to him except her love. He kissed her with an intensity that no film board of censors would permit.

And then he said, not in the dialogue of a polished playwright, but very much in the speech of a boy in Arcadia: "Gee, but I love you!"

And Ellen, when at last she spoke, admitted that she had long loved him. And so, you see, they had much in common.

When Lieder, after many efforts, succeeded in getting Norman on the telephone, it was to announce a catastrophe.

"Listen," commanded the agent. "Did you say you were sure of that part with Marie? Well, you're out of luck! They've signed Rod O'Neill to play it, and I understand Marie made 'em sign him. So that's out—see? They're payin' him seven fifty per week, too. Gosh, with a chance like that, you should take some other girl than Marie out in that boat of yours! Don't you s'pose Marie saw you?"

Lieder had more to say, but Norman broke in with a prolonged laugh.

"I should worry!" he shouted. "Let her sign anybody she wants, and let 'em pay anybody a thousand a week. From now on, old top, if anybody asks for me, tell 'em I'm in the hardware business."

"Hardware! Say—"

But Norman hung up. Then he settled himself to estimate the total cost of his folly.

He was going back to Arcadia—with Ellen. He was going back to his father's

store. They were going to have a house on an Arcadian hill, a house surrounded by oak trees and a garden full of flowers. The silent drama could, for all of him, suffer in silence after he left. Hollywood would know them no more. But how much could he save out of his expensive attempt to start at the top?

He busied himself with figures. While he was so engaged, Mr. Burroughs, the realtor, called him up.

"Garden Vista has no vacancy," said the rental agent, "but I have a client who insists on my asking all the tenants if they would consider subletting. I don't suppose you would, Mr. Gould, but my client would pay four hundred a month for your lease."

"He can have it!" shouted Norman. "I was just going to phone you. I'm leaving in a few days. Fix it all up for me, will you?"

Again he went at his figures; this gave them a slightly better complexion. Now, if he could dispose of the car, and not lose too much—a flivver would do in Arcadia—he wouldn't be so badly off.

The telephone rang again.

"Mr. Gould," said the automobile salesman, "Miss Fay Langdon has just signed a new contract, and she's asked us to get her a car like yours. There aren't any out here for sale, and it would take a month to get one from New York. Would you consider selling—at fifty-five hundred?"

"As a matter of fact," said Norman calmly—but it was a calm that only a good actor could have managed—"I would. I'll sell at that figure. I'm leaving in a few days."

"Ah! Europe, I suppose. So many of the players are going to Europe now."

"Yes, maybe. Tell Miss Langdon she can have it."

Then, striding toward his desk, he tore up the papers on which he had been figuring. It was so simple now that he could do it in his head. He had two hundred dollars more than he had started with.

"That will buy a ring!" he said. "And the rest will give us a start at the top—in Arcadia."

If there's a moral in this at all, it must be: Buy a car and lease a home that other people will want.

THE END

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KIDD STUFF

OH, for the days of the pirate ships,
And the bloody buccaneers
Hopefully waiting to come to grips
With the wealthy privateers!

Oh, for the thrills of the Spanish Main,
With a crossbone flag in sight,
And king crews singing a sea refrain,
With their broad decks cleared for fight!

Oh, for the zing of a cutlass stroke
And the curse of a one-eyed Kidd,
Peacefully carving up honest folk
And carving a sea chest lid!

Oh, for the sight, in the morning's flush,
Of a frigate full of swank,
Saving the saints in the crimson crush
From a-walking down the plank!

Pat Costello.

The Rider o' Spook Hollow

By CHARLES FRANCIS COE

Author of "Trickery Trail," "The Ranch Beyond," etc.

CHAPTER XIX (*Continued*).

GUN FANNING.

AS he staggered back Tod saw that his one chance lay in keeping the fight at long range as long as the odds were so heavily against him. Therefore he kept going in his backward motion, staggered clear of the trees, and fired point blank at the man who had struck him. Behind him other men were sliding down into the Slip, their shouts assuring the two who had attacked Tod that they were rescue-bound.

Though the man answered Tod's last shot he did not continue his advance, and Tod was certain that he was hit. It seemed an instinctive shot that had answered his own, a shot that had gone wild because the man firing it had acted in a purely muscular way rather than in a mental one, which involved aiming.

The darkness was too thick for Tod to tell whether that second man had fallen or not. He turned his attention to those who were charging recklessly into the Slip and darting toward the trees. Then—it was a move inspired by he knew not what—he dropped prone, and in no time his enemies were upon him, but unaware of his presence.

"They got 'im!" Trop called from a

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 24.

point less than six feet from Tod. "That shootin' settled his hash; close in an' locate him! Hey, Beltz, what d'ye say?"

The only answer that came from the trees was a groan, and that fact brought a curse to Trop's lips. Others of the band caught the same significance from the thing, too. There were muttering queries from the men about Tod. None seemed to know what should be done. It was quite clear that the young rider had silenced both of the men who had jumped him among the trees.

"Work back to where we was," Trop grunted to the men about him. "Work back, an' then we'll lay along the bank and see that this killin' *hombre* don't git away."

And Tod, his breath coming in tiny gasps of tensity, let them go. He let them go because his ears had caught the sounds of drumming hoofs. Far in the distance the riders of the Loop K were coming at last. Their ponies were being lashed into a frenzied race to the rescue, and the slinking men who worked their way back toward safety were due for the surprise of their lives.

Trop had gained the bank before the sound of the hoofs reached his ears. Then he cried out in warning, and started a race for his own horse. Tod leaped to his feet and gave reckless chase. His gun barked two or three times, and the answering shots were desultory, panicky, the sort which are fired at random with no thought other than that of delaying pursuit.

The shoe had suddenly been shifted. The pursued had become the pursuer. But shooting under that darkened moon, and at moving targets, was the wildest sort of hazard. There could be little hope of finding a mark, and Tod had to content himself with his own escape and such execution as he had achieved back in Willow Slip. The thunder of Trop's departure told him that the man, along with several others who had come with him, was making good his escape.

Tod returned to the bank of the Slip, and shouted a welcome to the oncoming riders. After finding him safe they grunted a frank and sorrowful regret that they had arrived too late to get into the fracas. When Tod told them that most of the gang had just taken flight, all but three or four wheeled their horses and took chase in the vagrant hope that fortune might favor them.

Tod brought his flash light into play again then. In the Slip they found one of the bandits who had drawn his last breath. He was the man who had sprawled over the ground when Tod had fired from the cover of the trees. Farther down they came upon another, who readily surrendered because of a bad hole through his upper chest just beneath the shoulder.

One of the men in the trees had a crease across his head that was as close a squeak as the one Tod had back in Salvation, and the other apparently had found the fighting too hot after he had dropped into Tod's shelter, and fled. Tod looked to his prisoner, and smiled in satisfaction when he discovered that the ghost was still in their midst and safely trussed up.

To the amazement of the riders he played the light over the flour-covered face, and explained how a little bacon grease rubbed on the skin would hold plain flour for a long time, and show a ghastly green in the proper light. Then he tore apart the ghost's shirt, and found there a spot light such as the one he carried himself.

"Which explains how this here gent got a face that lit up an' then faded out, lads!" Tod grinned. "I reckon the rider o' Spook Hollow ain't nothin' but an ord'nary rider dressed up queer. But we'll lug these gents to the ranch, an' see what they got to say for themselves!"

CHAPTER XX.

NAN ASSERTS HERSELF.

IT was a solemn band of riders that left Willow Slip on the return journey to the Loop K. Most of the men were deeply disappointed over the fact that they had been unable to take a part in the battle which proclaimed itself despite Tod's simple statement to the effect that he had managed to hold off the attackers.

Many questions were fired at Tod. The men were in a temper that had reached the bounds of control. They had all known in a hazy sort of way that Bram Goud had exerted a powerful and insidious influence over Rogers, and the very fact that nothing definite on the affair had come to them made them the more angry. They seemed now to feel that they had been deprived of a rightful chance at the things they had hated indefinitely over a period of months.

But Tod was adamant. Until he had Goud absolutely under his thumb, he rejected any thought of making an open secret of Rogers's troubles. Goud, he believed, was just the sort of man who would turn in spite and do any harm that he could. Even though he could gain nothing by hurting Rogers, Tod felt pretty certain that he would do it if he could.

The wounded men were cared for as well as possible, and two men guarded the man who had been the ghost. They left his face just as it was, and Tod had replaced the flash light that others might see the ingenuity with which the ghost had been fitted out to do his work.

As they drew near the familiar outbuildings, Tod asked Blink Sanders if Rogers knew of their departure from the ranch. He smiled in satisfaction as he learned that Barton had gone directly to the bunk house and roused the men quietly, and they in turn had departed with a view of keeping their movements secret from both the ranch owner and the despicable foreman.

"Take these buckos into the bunk house, lads," Tod said to the other riders. "Keep 'em there till after I have a talk with the ol' man an' this creepin' lizard Goud. See that nothin' starts till I come back, will you?"

So it was that the disappointed riders filed into their quarters and struck a light. Tod went so far as to cover the windows with blankets from one or two bunks. The plan which he had was to try to meet Rogers before Goud became aware of what was taking place, and in that manner speak frankly of what he already knew and drive through all obstacles for a full story of the strange events which had taken place.

The first part of his plan, that of seeing the rancher unknown to others in his household, was shattered before he had reached the porch. A figure detached itself from the shadows and ran toward him. It was Nan. As she ran to his arms he heard her mutter a prayer of thanks that he had returned.

"I couldn't sleep, Tod," she told him. "Something told me that terrible things were happening, and that you were in danger. I asked Nog to go see you, and he was gone so long that I thought you had not come to the meeting place.

"That creature Trop was here, too. He told Goud of his terible fight with you, and how you disappeared. But I heard him boast that you would not get far because of the beating he had given you. I was so miserable!"

Tod held her close a moment, and she kissed him happily.

"I reckon I'm all right, honey," he assured her. "We did have a real battle out there. That fellah can fight—rough and tumble! He cut me up a mite with a piece of shale, an' like to ruined my digestion with his knee."

"I'm so glad to see you," she repeated time and again. "I was awake when Nog came for the boys earlier to-night. I saw them sneak away, and at first I was going to stop them and ask what the trouble was, but I knew if you were in danger, they wouldn't tell me anyway, and any talk would only delay them if they were riding to your rescue."

"Little heroine! Never lose your head a heap, do you? But right now, honey, I can't take the time to tell you all that's come an' gone. I must see your father before this foreman rouses out."

Nan laid her hand gently on his arm, and led him toward the rear of the house. Through a back door they went, neither speaking and both treading as softly as possible. Finally, they mounted the stairs, and Nan pointed out a door. Tod kissed her silently, and she started back along the dark hall. The door of the room designated opened under his hand, and he stepped inside and closed it behind him.

Rogers was asleep, and Tod, even in the darkness of the room, could tell how fretful

a sleep it was, and how infinitely Goud's influence weighed upon the rancher. As he started for the bedside the rancher stirred, then rose to a sitting position.

"Keep quiet, boss," Tod warned. "It's Tod. I've come back to have a talk with you that nobody will know about."

Rogers's only answer was a sigh that seemed to be drawn from the very soles of his feet. Finally, he muttered:

"You can't do nothin' but make a heap o' trouble, Tod! I know you mean well, an' I know that you an' Nan love each other—but you can't make nothin' but trouble. Why can't you go away an' let me handle this thing myself?"

"'Cause you won't handle it, boss!" imperturbably. "You've had a good six months to do somethin' about it, an' this lizard has got you buffaloed outa your nerve an' senses both."

"You're only guessing—" the rancher began.

"Am I?" Tod snapped. "Have you signed up them partnership papers yet?"

The shot landed a square bull's eye. Rogers swung his feet to the floor.

"What the hell d'you know, Tod!" he demanded in a tone so loud that Tod was obliged to warn him to silence lest the foreman be awakened.

"I know about everything, John," he bluffed finally. "I know that Goud has got certain things on you, an' is usin' them in his own way. I know Goud's gang robbed the bank an' have tried a heap o' times to salivate me. I know as soon as you sign up them damn fool papers, he'll soak this ranch so thick with mortgages it 'll look like one o' these new-fangled life insurance policies after the premiums ain't been paid fer ten years!"

Rogers seemed to be breathing through his teeth, and Tod knew that he had made a vital impression on the man. By way of capitalizing the fact he continued:

"Bram is goin' to blackmail you plenty. He awready has, boss. So, as long as somebody is, an' I got bunged up plenty learnin' what I know—it might as well be me as him!"

"My Lord! You, too?" Rogers groaned. "Is everybody crooked?"

There was such a world of misery in the tone that Tod lost his hard-heartedness. He took Rogers's arms, and pressed him back to the edge of the bed. There the older man dropped his face into his hands, and fought to keep under control the misery that was his.

"Lissen, boss—I wouldn't blackmail you," Tod assured him. "You know that damned well! But somethin' has gotta be done to wake you up. You're in the hands o' these devils plenty, an' first thing you know everything that you had for Nan will be gone, an' she'll face life the daughter o' a failure! Can't you see that?"

"Money ain't everything, Tod," Rogers muttered in smothered tones. "If it wasn't fer Nan I'd throw that bum outa this place so fast his whiskers'd burn! I'm doin' it all fer her! You know how she is. If she thought I had done anythin' disgraceful it would be worse fer her than a packet o' debts a mile deep!"

Immediately Tod thought of the ideas which had come to him out on the range. Was Rogers now admitting complicity with the gang? Had they talked him into collaboration with them, and then turned to rend him? The thought made his blood fairly boil. His hate for Goud grew into a killing mania. He promised himself silently that, no matter how things finally ended, he would take Goud's blood in full measure.

"Wait, John!" he said then. "I been bluffin' a little, an' I'm not goin' to push you into tellin' things outa school! What I did was done fer you an' Nan. Mebbe you do know best, but you're playin' awful loose with her future.

"It might be better to play an open hand, an' at least let her meet life with money, because these thieves will drain you dry an' then tell her anyway!"

"No they won't!" Rogers growled. "Bram knows me well enough to know I'd hound him to hell an' kill him like a rattler if he did that!"

"What's the secret o' Spook Hollow, John?" Tod demanded then.

"You tell me to play an open hand," the rancher resented. "Then you spring a thing like that! Why not play an open

hand yourself? If you know that you know everythin'!"

"I got the ghost figgered plenty!" Tod suggested. "An' I know the money from the Salvation bank is out there with that gang o' Bram Goud's!"

"You don't know nothin' about Spook Hollow!" the rancher grunted, and Tod was very sure that there was a note of relief in the tones he used.

"Why not tell me all about it, John?" I'll give my word never to mention it, an' I swear I'll lay off if things is as bad as you think!" There was infinite pleading in the tone of Tod. He seemed to have plumbed the depths of the rancher's sorrow, and there in that darkened room he felt closer to the man than ever before.

Rogers seemed to ponder the proposal for a long time, then he rose and paced the floor slowly. Tod urged him again to trust him, pointing out that nothing could be lost in view of his sworn promise, and that something might be gained if a new mind was brought to bear on the problem.

"No!" the rancher grunted in finality, at the same time stopping his stride. "I come out here a good many years ago, Tod, an' I've made it my business to paddle my own canoe! It ain't easy to change habits like that! I'll go my own way an' I'll sink or swim alone."

"You can't do that!" Tod snapped angrily. "You'll drag Nan down with you if you go. You'd see that if you was yourself!"

"Leave Nan outa this!" Rogers retorted. "By heaven, I brought 'er up! There ain't never been anythin' good enough fer 'er! I'm doin' what I am now just on account o' her! You leave Nan outa this, an' keep out o' it yourself!

"You're a damn fine lad, Tod," he went on after a moment, "as fine as I ever knowed, an' I'd looked forward to a heap o' things with you an' my daughter, but a man can't allus have things the way he wants 'em. This here is a break that nobody could prevent, an' I'm able to handle it without any meddlin' from you!"

"That's your way o' looking at it, John," Tod snapped. "But you can't blame me if it ain't mine! I love Nan. I'm goin' to marry her if I have to shoot my way through you an' all this damn cheap gang o' thieves an' liars! Paste that in your sombrero an' don't forget it! I didn't come here to fight, but I ain't goin' to see Nan dragged down 'cause her ol' man has slipped into his dotage!"

The hot words seemed to cool Rogers rather than anger him more. He accepted them philosophically, and took to his pacing once more. Tod waited until the man spoke.

"Youngsters are allus hot-headed. They rush in too fast," Rogers said finally. "I ain't goin' to fly up in the air over what you said, but I am goin' to tell you again that you can't do a damn thing but harm, an' you'll serve everybody best by keepin' yore hands off'n this thing.

"As fer marryin' Nan, I reckon you ain't goin' to do it!"

"Well, John, this here begins to look like the end o' our friendship!" Tod said slowly. "You let that buzzard fire me; you let him ruin the ranch; you let him foul Nan's name by mentionin' marriage with her; and then you admit it's all 'cause he's got somethin' on you, an' claim you're doin' it fer Nan's sake!

"I say again: that's the part of a damn fool! I love Nan, and Nan loves me. All hell ain't goin' to keep us apart!"

"Nan 'll do as I say!" Rogers thundered.

Then the door burst open, and Nan herself stepped into the room. She sought out Tod, and her arm went around him. Then she faced her father, and her voice was tense and firm as she spoke:

"Father, in this particular case I will not do as you say!" she announced. "I will marry Tod the minute he wants me. I'll saddle Slipper this minute and ride to town with the man I love. If I never see you again, I'll still do it!"

Tod gripped her close, and Rogers received the words with the same sort of numb dejection with which he had greeted Tod's when the latter hinted of the things he had discovered. He sank to the edge of the bed again, and the girl went to his side and put her arm around him. He shook her off, saying:

"You've had your say, gal! I reckon

I never expected such words from you! But you said 'em, an' I reckon you're enough like me to stand by 'em! Go ahead, but pay the price yourself when the time fer payin' comes!"

Nan was sobbing softly, and Tod took her into his arms.

"You sure beat me all hollow, John," the young rider averred. "I reckon you're gone loco to act this way!"

"You'll either do as I ask an' keep out o' this, or you an' Nan can make yore own plans an' work 'em alone. That's my last say on the thing! You're both young an' both damn fools; go ahead an' breed misery!"

"Awright, John!" Tod agreed. "I'll take Nan an' we'll be married. We'll manage somehow, don't fret. An' then I'll do somethin' else, too. Bram Goud has done his best to salivate me! He's done all he can to ruin you an' Nan, too. So I'll just fight this out with Bram! It won't take me five minutes to start, either!"

With the words he wheeled to the door, Nan at his side. Something perilously like a great sob shook Rogers's frame, but he sat quite still and let them go.

"Light up the house downstairs, Nan," Tod snapped. "I'm goin' to bring about a heap o' conversation."

"Do, Tod!" the girl urged. "Maybe it was wrong, but I listened outside dad's door and I heard him admit those things. Whatever the truth is let's have it, and then we can stand by him, anyway!"

CHAPTER XXI.

FORCE.

WHILE Nan was busy with lamps, Tod strode angrily toward the bunk house. At the door he stopped. The place was blue with cigarette smoke, and Nog Barton was giving a realistic narrative of the exact manner in which he had seen the ghost in Spook Hollow, and the frightful appearance the prisoner made.

As for the prisoner, he sat in a far corner of the room, his whitened face looking ludicrous now where, a short time before, it had been appalling. The wounded man was stretched out on a bunk, and Blink Sanders offered the information that one of the riders had left for Salvation to get a doctor.

All the men still wore their guns and belts. Their attitude seemed to be one of expectancy despite the fact that the fighting was over. They looked eagerly toward Tod, and the expression on his face seemed to revive their hopes materially.

"I reckon we've reached the showdown at last, boys!" Tod snapped. "I claim that this here Bram Goud is a lyin', stealin', murderin' hound!"

"There ain't no news in that, Tod!" Barton grunted.

"An' I also claim that we gotta lay all the cards face up this very night, an' either give him this damn ranch or run him off'n it on a rail!"

There were shouts of accord with that plan. Barton allowed vehemently that they would never give him the place, and that if he showed more power than they granted in their estimates of him, they would give him the ranch and then drill him.

"Two o' you lads bring this here flattened ghost along, an' keep him quiet an' safe. One o' you keep a gun on this gent with the creased head, an' one stay here with the bandit on that bunk. We're goin' over to the ranch house, an' somebody's goin' to do a heap o' talkin'. See that Bram Goud remains with us to hear it all, too!"

The men showed their eagerness in the speed with which they did as Tod asked. Very shortly the riders were marching toward the now lighted ranch house. As they entered the main room, Tod disposed of the men in accordance with a plan he had in mind. Nan greeted them silently, her beautiful face drawn with pain and apprehension.

Then Tod, after seating both riders and prisoners about the room, stalked up the stairs and pounded upon the door of Goud's room. The foreman demanded to know who was there, and Tod kicked the door open and showed the man the business end of his gun. Goud's face paled a little, and

he paused in the process of pulling on his boots.

"What's the idee?" he demanded.

"So you heard us, eh, Bram?" Tod sneered, noting that the foreman had about completed dressing.

"I heared a lot o' commotion, an' was goin' to find out what it was."

"You won't have no trouble findin' out, Bram!" Tod promised significantly. "That's goin' to be the best thing you do!"

"I dunno what business you got around this place anyhow!" Goud growled with a weak show of bluster that was meant for courage.

"You'll know that, too! Damned quick!" Tod assured him.

Under the threat of the gun Goud went below, and gazed in mute surprise at the riders assembled. When he saw the ghost he uttered a sharp and resounding curse that embodied both amazement and chagrin.

Tod glanced about and saw that Rogers had not yet come downstairs. He wondered what the man was doing, and glanced inquiringly at Nan, who shook her head in doubt. However, the matters at hand were of sufficient import so that Tod passed the point without comment. After all, there was little that Rogers could do.

"Sit down there, Goud," Tod ordered, at the same time waving his gun emphatically. The foreman obeyed, his eyes shifting about frantically and his lips twisted into a sneer.

"A gent does whatever he's told with a six-gun proddin' his gizzard," he growled. "He says anythin' he's told to say, too!"

"What you say is goin' to be the truth if it's the last thing you ever say!" Tod snarled. He was having difficulty keeping his hands off the man.

"Now, Bram," he pursued after a moment of glaring, "how many o' these gents do you know?"

"All o' the riders, naturally," Goud countered.

"How many o' the others?"

"Nary a one," Goud lied.

"Don't know the pasty-faced gent with the lamp under his shirt, huh?" Tod grinned.

"Nope. Never seen any o' these gents afore. They'll tell yuh that themselves."

"They will? Mebbe. I ain't asked 'em yet. Does you happen to know a gent named Trop?"

"Trop? Lemme see—Trop? Sure! He runs a saloon down in Salvation. I know him."

"When'd you see him last?"

"He rode out here the other day; said he had a fight with you. He was ridin' with a posse that was huntin' you."

Tod had already learned that here was a liar who thought like chain-lightning. He would be no easy man to trap into damaging admissions.

"When did you see him before that?"

"Don't remember. We ain't exackly what you'd call friends, me an' Trop."

"No. You're a heap more'n that!" Tod snapped. "You didn't meet Trop out at Willow Slip the other night, did you?"

"Willow Slip? Nope."

"That was the night you found me out at the bunk house," Tod prompted.

"Nope. I didn't meet him that night."

"What was you doin' out so early that mornin', Bram?"

"That ain't none o' your business."

"I'm makin' it my business. I know you did meet Trop out at the Hollow. I was with Trop. It was Trop that hit you on the head right out at this very bunk house." Tod was grinning amiably, and every one could see that Bram was growing more and more uncertain of himself. This last shot, that conveyed the impression that Trop had double-crossed him, went deep with Goud. However, he controlled himself with an effort and grinned weakly.

"Sure," Tod went on evenly, "me an' Trop met you out there, an' I was layin' in the trees to hear all that was said so's Trop couldn't slip it over on me just like he has on you. I put him up to tellin' you the boys was gittin' nervous just to see what you'd say about it."

"Yo're lyin', by Heaven!" Goud bellowed, and rose to his feet.

"Set down!" Tod bellowed back. "You sure wasn't sucker enough to trust a gent like Trop, was you? Him an' me had everythin' planned pretty! The bank

robbery an' all. Who do you think tipped me off that Caspar was goin' to shoot through my blankets while the rest of the gang was shootin' down by the bank?"

"Trop did that? That's why you got away?" Goud was fighting against what seemed the obvious, for he knew no manner in which Tod could know all these things except that Trop had crossed him.

"Sure," Tod went on laconically. "An' Trop crossed the rest o' these suckers, too. Trop's on his way with the money from the bank right now. I'm goin' to meet him, Bram. See, he give me this to tide me over till I can make it to where he is."

Tod played a master stroke when he reached into his boot and drew forth the sheaf of bills that he had secured from Trop's saddlebags—but it proved fatal to his well-planned campaign of dragging the truth from Goud. The foreman's face lighted, he leaned easily back in his chair, and felt for papers and tobacco.

"Great!" he sneered; then: "Trop told me you'd robbed him. That there was money he was takin' to Caspar to pay saloon bills! He told me all about it. I don't see how Trop could cross me when we ain't never had a deal together."

"You're lyin' faster'n a hoss can run, Goud," Tod accused, "an' you know it. You know this ghost gent over in the corner there. You know this hombre with the creased skull, an' you know another we got out in the bunk house. You an' Caspar an' Trop planned that bank robbery, an' planned to shoot me at the same time 'cause you was afraid I'd cut in on your game with John Rogers.

"Well, I have cut in—cut in deep, too! You reached the end o' your rope, thassall, Bram. These lads that have worked here for a long spell think enough o' this place an' the ol' man to hit fer Spook Hollow an' blast out that gang o' yours."

"I got no gang!" Goud persisted sullenly. "You're talkin' foolish. I never seen these gents before."

Tod was on the point of pressing more charges home, when the sound of many hoofs clattered into the space outside the house.

"Watch your men, boys!" Tod challenged his friends. "If this is that gang ridin' in to take back their ghost, play hell with 'em. You, Nan, back into the hall, quick!"

Goud and the other prisoners showed high interest, and the Loop K riders rose to their feet an' drew their guns. Nan remained at Tod's side. But the expectancy was unfounded in fact. The men who had swarmed down upon the ranch house were not from Spook Hollow. Tod grunted in slight dismay as he saw the first figure to appear in the door.

The man was smiling in satisfaction, and his gaze did not leave Tod's face for a single instant. It was the Salvation sheriff.

"We rode plumb into a circle, Tod," the man snapped, "but we finally meet up with each other. I'll be takin' you along now."

"Sheriff, I reckon you won't," Tod grunted. "What you're goin' to do is take these other gents along!" He indicated the ghost and Bram Goud, along with the other prisoner.

"I come fer you, an' I'm goin' to take you!" the officer growled.

Others of the posse had jammed into the room, and Tod could see that feeling ran rather high against him because of the chase he had led them.

"You're lookin' fer the bank robbers, ain't you, sheriff?" he asked quietly.

"I am; but I'm also lookin' *at* an escaped prisoner. Better come in without trouble, Tod."

"Sheriff, you're makin' a fool o' yourself. I promised I'd come in when I finished a job I had to do. Ain't that good enough?"

"Not fer me! You broke jail—my jail—an' I'm goin' to take you back!"

Suddenly John Rogers stood in the door leading into the hall. His rumpled hair, his haggard face, the wild glare that filled his eyes as they swept over the gathering before him, gave him the appearance of a man driven to desperation. He moistened his lips constantly.

"You stick to that decision, sheriff!" Bram Goud urged, his manner more than eager. "This here gent just pulled some o' the bank money right outen his own boot. He boasted about havin' it. There's somethin' crazy here, an' I ain't sure all

these riders ain't in the thing with him! Anyhow, he had the money, an' it sure looks like money from the bank—new an' all!"

The sheriff strode into the room and seized the bills.

"I reckon you're right, Bram!" he announced in happy tones. "It 'll take a heap o' explainin' now to make folks believe that you was out walkin' the night the robbery was done, Tod. I'm arrestin' you this time, not as a 'spicious character—I'm arrestin' you as one o' the gang that robbed that bank—an' we'll boil you plenty till we learn who the others are, too."

Tod saw that Bram Goud threatened to come out the victor after all. It had been his plan to see Goud and the others safely guarded, then race for Spook Hollow and try to collar the remainder of the gang. There was no reason why the men there should suspect that he knew of the lair; therefore they would not hurry much about leaving it.

But now that he had spoken so freely to Goud, they would be warned in a matter of hours, and while the idiotic sheriff depended on appearances the real robbers, possibly Goud with them, would be streaming for safety, with the loot of the bank still in their possession.

"Sheriff, I ain't goin'!" Tod snapped. "You got a posse here, an' most o' the men in it knows me an' don't believe I robbed that bank!"

"You're comin' awright, Tod!" the officer snarled, and his hand went toward his gun.

"Stick 'em up, everybody!" It was Nog Barton who shouted the order. He had taken a place in the room which commanded the situation effectively, and in each of his hands he held a gun. "This ain't any Sunday school party, gents!" he warned solemnly. "Stick 'em up, or I swear I'm goin' to cut loose pronto!"

"Good boy, Nog!" Tod shouted. "You, Blink, I give you all my word this is a cheap frame-up! I know where that gang is, an' I know where the money is. This Goud skunk is the ringleader o' the whole crew! Who'll ride with me an' bust 'em out?"

All the Loop K men gladly shouted their willingness.

"Then there's just this to be done, boys!" Tod grinned happily. "Three o' you disarm all these birds an' remain here to keep 'em from strayin'. The rest o' us'll ride fer Spook Hollow, an' sweep it clean o' these bandits pronto!"

Nog Barton designated the three who were to remain, and then the men started for their horses. For a moment Nan caught Tod's hand. "I'm going with you!" she said softly.

Before Tod could answer there came a choking cry from John Rogers. He had stepped into the room, and Tod saw that he was gazing at the man who had played the part of the ghost. The eyes of the rancher were blazing, his hands were held with fingers but half clenched like the talons of a condor.

"He has sent me away, Tod. I've—I've—got to go with you!" Nan said waveringly.

"Ride, Tod!" Rogers suddenly bellowed, and into his tones had come the old fire. "Ride these dogs down, Tod! By heaven, lad! I'm behind you all the way! Nan—Nan, my child—come to me! I reckon I been crazy! Come straight back here, Tod, lad!" he cried then, as he caught Nan in his arms. "Come straight back here! First off, hell is goin' to pop plenty; then there'll be the biggest weddin' ever held!"

Bram's face, as Tod darted across the porch toward a fresh pony, was twisted in rage and fear.

CHAPTER XXII.

LOOT.

As he trailed along with the excited Loop K riders, Tod's mind reviewed again and again the final scene of the shifting tableaux which had taken place at the ranch house. The very sound of Rogers's voice as he had called out first to Nan and then to Tod himself, proclaimed a new lease on life for the rancher.

Tod was happy; happier than he could

remember having been in his whole life. Earlier in the night he had made his far-reaching decision to capture the ghost of Spook Hollow, and the fact that things promised now to clear up because of that move, was a source of extreme satisfaction to him.

The riders about him were thrilled to boisterousness by the promised action ahead. Once again they swept past Willow Slip like a tornado of horseflesh, and Tod headed them directly toward the Hollow. But he had not lost sight of several facts in connection with events pending. First, he remembered that there were two escapes from the lair of the bandits.

The men might take to the Hollow itself, or they might use the ravine he had discovered, near which he had left the two horses. It would be necessary to attack from two directions, to bottle the dangerous crew within the confines of their own hiding place, and then smoke them out in any manner possible.

He spoke briefly to Nog Barton and Blink Sanders. They in turn selected two more men from the group. When the cavalcade had reached the first incline toward the Hollow, Tod stopped them for a parley. He explained exactly what the situation was, and suggested that the men wait there for one hour, then creep into the Hollow, and unless they were forced into fighting, to remain in waiting until the four riders under his guidance might climb the back of the peak and force the bandits out, where they could attack.

And what a mad race Tod then led the others! Ponies were crowded with no respect for mere flesh and bones. The four men stayed with him, and it seemed no time at all till they swung up the mountain over the trail where Tod had led the posse that leisurely chase.

There was no winding trail this time! Tod prodded his animal in a straight line upward into the first ravine, then up the steep slope over Stony Brow. Dawn was showing the first of its gray fingers across the eastern heavens when they hit the ridge where Trop and himself had fought their memorable battle.

Then onward still, and up the side of the peak; they did not pause for a thing. Pine trees scraped their faces, the ponies heaved mightily with the effort they expended, hoofs clattered across rock and thudded softly upon springy pine needles. For many months afterward those four men told of the mad ride upon which Tod led them that night.

When daylight actually came they were halfway to the entrance of the secret ravine. No sounds of shooting had reached their ears, and Tod was certain that the bandits remained in ignorance of the trap which was about to be sprung upon them. He based his belief upon the thought that, had the others been forced to attack, the bandits would take to the back trail and ride directly upon them.

By the time the rays of the sun had driven off the soft cool of night, Tod reined in the fagged horse he rode and grinned at those behind him.

"We're here, gents!" he announced.

"I ain't only half here!" Sanders grumbled, "an' this hoss I been ridin' is five miles behind his breath!"

Working rapidly, passing instructions to the others as he did so, Tod placed the heaving mounts safely, then led the way toward the cañon. Scarcely had he started traveling when sounds came from ahead. He stopped, and held up a warning hand:

"They're coming, boys," he snapped. "I needn't tell you we want them all!"

They backed out of the ravine for more room in which to fight. Soon five men, each leading a horse, appeared. Tod sang out an order to halt, and in answer one of the men fired twice in their general direction and made a leap for his saddle. Nog Barton yipped in high glee, and blazed away. Shots soon set up a staccato roar that sent birds screaming from the scene, and woke the silence of the range into bedlam.

Tod saw that the men had gained their mounts, and were making a dash down the peak for the comparative safety of the timberland and gullies that lay between them and the ridge of shale. Then he saw another thing upon which he bet everything in one of those sudden impulses that

are wont to come to men in moments of stress.

Trop was not among the five!

With the realization he stopped short. Barton, Sanders, and the others had leaped to the backs of their weary horses and started a pursuit that could not long be maintained. However, they were answering shot for shot the fire of the fleeing bandits, and Tod, still playing his hunch, fell behind them, and slipped once more into the ravine. There was that by-pass down which the sentry had disappeared! He meant to make certain that Trop was not remaining there in safety!

It took him but a few minutes to reach the place. Nature, he found, had been ingenious indeed in its preparation of this road to security. With his gun in his hand he followed the narrow gorge. At one place it rose steeply, then dropped away in a downward angle, and rose again onto a sort of mesa, where Tod saw a rough log cabin.

"So this is the place where they spent their days, eh?" he mused. "Right snug!"

The door of the cabin stood partly open, and the place had every appearance of desertion. As he walked across the mesa a slight wind swayed the door, and it fell wide open and swung there on hinges that creaked a little. Tod knew the long chances he was taking if Trop happened to be in the building. It would be the simplest of things for the bandit to kill him as he entered.

But he seemed driven on by some unknown power, some mighty surge of achievement that had come to him on the wings of success. Here was the end of that mysterious trail which led to Nan and to happiness; here was the end of Bram Goud's dominion over lovable old John Rogers; here was the opening of a new era for the men of the Loop K; everything for which Tod had yearned and fought!

It seemed to him that he would have stalked a thousand Trop's that morning. He was at the door now, gun in hand. All was silent. He knew a sense of disappointment in the growing belief that he had come where Trop was not; that he had left the fighting to the others, who had met the band of fleeing men.

He stepped through the door, and something crashed downward onto his gun. The weapon spun from his hand, and his fingers went numb under the blow. Trop stood before him, a malicious smile wreathing his battered lips:

"You damn fool!" he snarled, his gun trained true upon Tod's chest. "You double damn fool! I'll kill you now!"

"If you dared to you would have shot while I was walkin' across that open space, Trop!" Tod snapped back at the man. "Just fire a gun, an' there's a dozen men at hand to riddle you so full o' lead you'll look like a lace curtain!"

With the words, and actuated by a flood of feeling that went back to that blow from the shale and that knee jammed into his stomach, Tod lunged forward. Trop tried to strike his head with the heavy gun, but Tod avoided the blow, and once more they grappled. In a consuming hatred that swept reason completely from his mind, Trop cast his own useless weapon from him and fought with the mad ferocity of a wild thing.

In the first two minutes of that combat Tod felt his shoulder wound open and the flesh about it become warm from the fresh flow of blood. But he seemed immune to physical pain. He battered away again at Trop's bruised and aching ribs. Very soon the man grunted at each blow. Finally, Tod broke free, and a dancing smile darted to his lips.

"Now it's my turn, Trop!" he cried gayly. "Come an' take it!"

Trop lunged forward again, his great arms swinging blows that would have felled an elephant. But those blows were destined never to land. With the speed of a wraith and the lightning flash of a serpent, Tod danced in and out and struck straight, telling, hurtful blows. Trop's head swayed under those impacts; his beard again became saturated from the blood that seeped from his distended nostrils.

And as he shot in those killing blows Tod grew calm. Each time he landed he would taunt his enemy, until the latter's eyes grew as red from hate as the beard

on his face was red with blood. But Trop was ponderous where Tod was agile; Trop was fighting blindly where Tod was fighting a cool, well-planned battle; Trop was in the wrong and Tod was in the right, and he fought with a full-blown consciousness of that fact.

Once Trop was battered to his knees, and there he cowered, his breath rattling in his throat, his arms flung protectingly over his face and head.

"Get up an' fight, Trop!" Tod taunted him. "Get up an' let's see the kind o' a man you are! I won't hit you while you're down! I won't rip you with shale! I won't drive my knee at you!"

The beaten man arose in a last desperate attempt. Once more his huge fists swung like flails, but they swung wildly, without definite objective other than a blind hope they might land and settle the fight. Tod prodded his left hand against the battered face before him; he lashed his hard right fist onto the other's ear as the man charged.

It was a terrible sight, yet a just one. The two were fighting to the last ditch. Their clothes hung in tatters about them, especially Tod's, as Trop had found a chance to change since their first meeting.

"Put Casper up on a roof to kill me, eh?" Tod taunted. "Have him shoot at me from alleys, too! An' still you couldn't kill the man with a charmed life! You'll be s'prised to know I was settin' in Willow Slip that night enjoyin' yore chat with Bram, Trop!"

Almost with each sentence Tod was battering home those straight, telling blows. Trop's breath wheezed and rattled as he sucked it through swollen lips. Once again a right hand blow sent him spinning back against the wall, and he seemed to hang there a fleeting second before his body slumped downward and his knees refused the load thrust upon them.

Tod stood over the man.

"Get up, Trop! Get up an' show us the stuff yore made of! You shore ain't goin' to quit none, are you? This fight has only just begun! I thought you was a he-man, Trop!"

But even those taunts could not raise the man's head from where it rested upon his forearms on the floor. Trop was all done. He had absorbed more punishment than ten average men could take. The will to fight was still vibrating within him; it was his physical being which had reached the limit.

"Now, Trop," Tod announced, "we're here all alone! I'm goin' to beat you till you pass out. Then I'm goin' to throw water on you till you come to—an' beat you till you go out again. I'm goin' to square our account plenty!"

He moved toward the cowering man as though to execute his threat.

"Don't!" Trop begged. "My Lawd, I'm beat to death now!"

"Then tell me what you stayed back here for?"

"I thought it was the surest way to git away," Trop muttered thickly.

As he spoke Tod moved closer and raised his fists again. The man's whole body seemed to shrivel under the threat as if the membranes and tissues themselves saw another blow coming and fought to avoid it.

"You stayed behind to take that bank loot, Trop!" Tod snapped. "It ain't far from here, an' I want it."

Trop did not answer at once, and again Tod threatened. With a whine Trop pointed to a rolled blanket at the side of the room.

Picking up the fallen weapons from the floor, and with his eyes constantly upon the cringing form of Trop, Tod opened the roll. His eyes bulged at the wealth it disclosed. There lay the money from the Salvation bank!

He rolled it again, then from a bucket in the corner gave Trop a drink and bathed his face. The water seemed to revive the man a little.

"You're comin' with me now, Trop," he said after that. "Your own hoss an' mine oughta be up the hill a ways. I reckon we'll drag along there somehow, an' then ride back through this ravine, an' down into Spook Hollow. Better take a lingerin' look at it, too, while you're there. I reckon you won't see it again for a long, long time."

He helped the bandit to his feet, and for the first time realized how utterly spent, both mentally and physically, the man was. A series of broken sobs seemed crossing Trop's lips, his body swayed weakly, and he willingly hung to Tod's arm as they stepped out into the growing day.

At the end of the ravine there was no sight or sound of the others who had ridden with Tod. He decided that they had ridden after the escaping bandits regardless of his absence and the fagged condition of their ponies.

Trop gained a little strength as his breath came back to him, but progress up the peak was slow, and the man had to pause for rest before he was able to climb into the saddle of his own horse.

As they came down the hill again Tod secured his winded mount, and fastened the rein to the pommel of Trop's saddle. Then he ordered the bandit to ride ahead, and they cut through the ravine and clambered down the steep ghost trail into Spook Hollow. Tod smiled himself at the picture they made.

No riders appeared, and he presumed that the boys in the Hollow also had found something in the line of fighting. Doubtless the whole escape had been planned, and some of the men went one way and some the other. Trop alone, as keeper of the loot, had planned the clever trick of remaining behind until the fighting was over.

"Where yuh takin' me — Jennin's?" Trop managed to ask when they turned off the Salvation trail.

"To the Loop K, Trop," Tod grinned contentedly. "To the Loop K, where I reckon we'll about deal you an' Bram Goud out, an' deal me an' John Rogers back in again!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NEW DAY DAWNS.

TROP refused to say anything during that return ride to the ranch. It was evident that the man's battered body was fighting for control of outraged nerves and aching muscles and bones. He was a thoroughly beaten bandit, and Tod marveled a little at the persistence of his sullen manner in view of the crushing defeat he had suffered.

As they wended a leisurely way over the plains Tod began to understand something of the torture that was Trop's. In addition to the collapse of his plans, the man was undergoing physical suffering of great degree. Tod himself, his shoulder wound reopened and the hurt on his head aching from the violence of his battle, longed for a restful bath, then unbroken hours of sleep.

He fought off a drowsiness that he knew would prove fatal should it reach the heights of sleep. But time and again the motion of the saddle under him proved almost too much, and his lids slipped downward over his eyes. The ranch buildings were a happy sight to him when they appeared, and he smiled in infinite contentment when he saw Nan Rogers run to her pony and start toward them at a gallop.

When she drew up with him he had another thrill. For the face of the girl had altered in the hours of his absence. The strained, haggard appearance had fled before a recrudescent glow of happiness. Her teeth flashed in a smile, and she called to him in a voice of triumph. Finally she fell in beside him and reached across to imprison his hand in her own, and thus they rode to the ranch house.

"The place is still here, anyhow," Tod suggested in the hope that she would tell him all that had happened the night before.

"And it always will be here, Tod," the girl assured him in a delighted tone. "It will always be dad's, too—that is—until it becomes—ours!"

There was a pinch of her fingers against his own as she spoke the words, and Tod turned a beaming if tired face toward her.

"I'm right glad, honey," he said after a moment. "It was long enough comin'."

"You did it, Tod. Father told me just before he left that he was happier than any time in his life—and most of it he owed to you."

"That's nice. He's gone away some place?" Tod asked.

"Yes. He left with the sheriff, and they rode into town. They had a very long talk together, and they went in with fire in their eyes. I do hope that nothing more happens, dear. This has been such a terrible time—and you have suffered so much! But that will end now. The riders are back, and they say that the gang will never bother any one else."

"They got 'em?" Tod asked eagerly.

"They don't say much about it, Tod. Blink does a heap of grinning in that quiet way of his, and Nog says that their horses were so tired they really had to rely on shooting—"

Tod laughed softly, and Nan evidenced the fact that she had caught the significance of the story the riders had brought back to the ranch.

"What does Bram Goud have to say, Nan?" Tod asked after a little.

But they had reached the porch, and a man had come out to take their horses to the corral.

"Bram is finding out what it feels like to be a prisoner," the girl answered hastily. "And now, dear, dad and the sheriff will certainly not be back before mid-afternoon, and Nog and Blink and the others will care for this man Trop. So I want you to rest and let me ease your hurts."

"I reckon I'll just drop down an' wait till things are all set, Nan," Tod began.

But the girl interrupted: "The boys are here, and there isn't a blessed thing you can do that they cannot. You can rest assured that Trop and Goud and the others will be cared for safely. Those riders would love to have them try a few tricks."

"Did you find out what Goud was holding over your father's head?" Tod asked.

"We found out everything, Tod. Dad was in a towering rage, and called himself all the fools the West ever saw—but it will all work out right, I'm sure. You'll be wonderfully surprised—and pleased when you know it all. But you've got to rest first—rest and wash."

Then she took Tod's arm and led him to a mirror. At the first sight of himself Tod's resistance fled. His face was streaked with the dust of the plains and the shale ledge, and through the dirt ran marks of perspiration and blood. He was a sight not pleasant to the eye. His clothes were torn and bedaubed.

Nog Barton appeared at the door with a hearty welcome and assured Tod that Trop had been added to their collection of prisoners, and that they would all be guarded past any chance of escape until Rogers and the sheriff returned. He joined Nan in insisting that Tod rest while he could, and promptly volunteered to see that the hero was furnished with requisites for a change of clothes and a comfortable sleep. While he was gone on this errand Tod spoke again to Nan:

"I reckon I know a heap more'n you think I do—but I don't know it all by any means. What I'm wantin' to find out is just what Goud's secret was. I know all about the ghost—how they worked it an' all—"

"The ghost was his secret, Tod!" the girl cried. "Oh, it was so low, so mean—and yet so clever."

"You don't mean to tell me that yore dad was scared by that bum ghost!" Tod demanded incredulously.

"I do. Not by the ghost itself, you understand, because he never even saw that, and did not know of its appearance in the Hollow. But it was the fact that the ghost was there that gave Goud his power over dad. However, I promised not to talk until things are all settled, and that cannot be until father and the sheriff return from town; so you might just as well enjoy your bath and rest."

Barton returned then, his arms laden with clothing, and took Tod in hand. He went with him while the tired rider bathed his hurts and shaved himself. Then he sat down while Tod for the first time in his life stretched out on a bed in the ranch house of the Loop K and demanded a cigarette before sleeping.

During the process of smoking he kept up a running fire of questions, many of which Barton was unable to answer, but a few of which he explained readily. For instance, he admitted that the men who had broken for the ledge when the bandit's secret ravine had been found would cer-

tainly have gained their freedom had the fagged horses been relied upon, and that it was by his own orders that Blink and the others cut loose their weapons in earnest.

"You got 'em all?" Tod asked.

"Right to the last gent."

"Drilled 'em? You killed the five o' them?"

"Nope. We salivated one and winged the others up so bad they come to us like a burro to water."

"Good. Any of 'em talk yet?"

"Not a peep. They seem to think they got somethin' up their sleeve that 'll save 'em in the end. They got a heap of faith in that Goud gent, Tod."

"I guess you got the number o' that ghost, ain't you, Nog?" Tod asked finally. And before Barton could answer he had carelessly flicked the stump of his cigarette out the open window and was settling himself down for a needed sleep.

"Well, I know he's plumb real—human!"

"You know the whole story on him, don't you?"

"Can't say I do," Barton admitted. "I remember the squawk the ol' man set up when he first seen him—an' I know there's somethin' strange about 'im, but—"

"Well, I'll tell you who he is," Tod muttered. "He ain't nobody under heaven other than Dave Gaard himself! Gaard wasn't ever murdered. There was some kind of a scheme that Goud an' Trop an' Caspar rigged up out there, an' they used Gaard to scare folks away from their hangout. That was easy to figger out."

"Well, the damned rats!" Barton exploded violently. "No wonder George Lenz was so sure he had seen Gaard's ghost. Say, ain't they the clever gents, though?"

"George saw what he said he seen awright," Tod muttered sleepily. "An' that explains all that—but why did that have anythin' to do with John Rogers? John sure wasn't scared o' ghosts!"

"How'd you git wise to that trick, Tod?" Barton asked in a tone that showed his admiration.

"Easy. I worked my way through that secret ravine, an' I seen this here ghost on his hoss waitin' for somebody to scare. I followed him down into Spook Hollow, an' just by luck I picked out what was s'posed to be Gaard's grave to hide behind.

"Then I decided I'd lay that pile o' stones across the steep down trail to trip up the ghost in case I couldn't get him no other way. When I moved the stones I found the ground under 'em hadn't been dug up a bit; so I knowed it never was Gaard's grave. That bein' so, Gaard wasn't really dead, an' this gent that was scarin' folks must be Gaard hisself!"

"Damme-e-e-e!" Barton commented, his head shaking dubiously the while. "This gang sure laid some pretty plans!"

"They sure did!" Tod agreed vehemently. "An' they come right close to workin' 'em, too! But I still don't get the connection between the ghost an' ol' John. How could this Bram Goud hold anythin' like that over Rogers's head, Nog?"

"You got me," Barton shrugged; "but it's a cinch that he did. It 'll all come out plain enough when Rogers finally talks. I wish you could 'a' seen 'im when he left fer town with the sheriff; he was a mighty diff'runt Rogers, Tod. He was the ol' boy we allus knew before Goud showed up."

"I'm right glad to hear that from you, too, Nog—but I knowed it the minute I met up with Nan outside. Her face showed it plumb plain."

"I reckon we'll be goin' to a weddin' right soon now," Barton chuckled, "an' I gotta admit I hate the idee o' lookin' ahead to you as my boss, Tod. But o' course I gotta earn a livin'!"

"Get out!" Tod grinned drowsily. "When I get to be boss around this place I'm goin' to have me some real riders anyhow; so you needn't worry."

Barton rose and sauntered toward the door.

"While you're sleepin' I reckon I'll run down an' have me a nice cozy talk with Miss Nan," he warned.

"It's plumb wonderful what that gal can stand, Nog," Tod muttered; "but be right sure to rouse me out as soon as the ol' man rides in, won't you?"

"I'll rouse yuh out the minute that pinto o' hisn busts up the sky line," Barton promised as he left. Before the sound of his footsteps had died out in the lower rooms Tod was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CASPAR TALKS.

IT seemed to Tod but a very few minutes before Barton was once again in the room and shaking his arm.

"Rogers is climbin' in," the rider announced calmly. "Him an' the sheriff an' two other gents is grindin' grit, too."

Tod was out of bed almost before Barton had finished his terse speech in which he had announced, not only the approach of the rancher and his party, but also that they were traveling fast. Nog rolled a cigarette with deft expertness as Tod hurried into his clothes.

"Yuh look a heap better, Tod," the rider said; and Tod made no direct answer other than a smile.

"One o' the other riders looks like Slim," Barton finally said.

"Good," Tod answered. "I reckon poor Slim has been playin' seven up with deputy sheriffs till he's wore callouses on his deal fingers. He'll be glad to be out."

They went downstairs and Nan met them.

"They are almost here, Tod," she said eagerly. "I have a feeling that very soon all the clouds will disappear, and the good old Loop K will be what it used to be!"

"The clouds all disappeared the minute I saw you, Nan," Tod said gallantly, and the girl blushed a little as he slipped his arm around her and winked happily at Barton.

They were on the porch when the four riders reached the ranch. Rogers and the sheriff were riding with a stranger between them; bringing up the rear was Slim Willett. The face of the rider was set in a frown despite his new freedom. He glared at those about him much as though he expected greetings and commiserations which were denied him.

Rogers lost no time in leading the men into the big living room and dispatching a rider to get the other prisoners. In a very short time another conference had been called much like the one which Tod himself had arranged such a short time before. But this time John Rogers was in command, and the methods he used attested his return to his old self. Tod smiled contentedly as he saw that Goud's power was gone.

"Now that we're all here, gents," Rogers opened, "we won't waste a bit o' time. First off, I want to say that I fired Tod Jennings a short time ago. There's a heap goes before that, but it 'll save everybody's time if we start out from that point.

"Now, Tod rode into Salvation an' booked up at the hotel. He had some suspicions that things wasn't all they should be out here, an' he thought damn little o' Bram Goud!"

The rancher paused long enough to cast a bitter glance at the erstwhile foreman's clouded face, and Tod saw that Goud had reached a point of desperation. The man's ratlike eyes seemed glued upon the face of the stranger whom Rogers had brought to the ranch and Tod was certain that he was endeavoring to intimidate the man.

"That very night," Rogers went on, "George Lenz shows up at Salvation an' allows he's seen the ghost o' Dave Gaard out in Spook Hollow. That rouses Tod up, 'cause my daughter has been tellin' him that Goud is usin' somethin' at Spook Hollow against me!"

Goud's eyes shifted from the stranger's face long enough to cast a snarling glance at Nan, but the man seemed vitally interested in the words of Rogers, and quickly gave them attention as Rogers continued:

"So that night, Tod decides he'll hike fer Spook Hollow, an' take a peek fer hisself at this here ghost. But he don't git there!"

At that point the ranch owner turned a rather baleful glare upon the stranger, and the man cringed a little, his tongue wetting his lips and his hands moving furtively over his knees. Goud gave vent to a muttered curse, and from the pantomime Tod assumed that the foreman guessed the source of Rogers's complete information. It was

evident that this stranger had done some talking!

"Nope," Rogers continued after a brief pause, "Tod don't git to Spook Hollow that first try! An' the reason he don't is 'cause he's shot while he's tryin' to git his hoss! It all took place in that little alley near the stable, an' right close to a saloon owned by Trop an' Caspar.

"The shootin' was done by this gent right here—Caspar!" The rancher indicated the stranger and Tod, face to face at last with the coward who had so nearly killed him, started to rise.

"An' what's more," the rancher went along, warmed now to the task at hand, "he admits he done it, an' admits he done it 'cause Trop made 'im!"

All eyes turned toward Trop, but the man met the angry stares with a cool sullenness that amazed Tod. The more he saw of this man Trop the more he realized that he was a stronger character than Goud, even though the latter seemed the head of the gang.

"I'd rather have Caspar tell his own yarn, gents," Rogers said shortly, "but he ain't much of a talker, an' I'm plumb anxious to git this affair over so's we kin handle other matters to follow.

"Tod had the good sense to know that this here attempt to salivate him had come from Goud 'cause Goud was tryin' to hurt me, an' him an' Tod had had a coupla fights—if anybody'd call 'em that!"

At this open reference to Goud's frailty in Tod's hands, several of the riders laughed outright, which added not inconsiderably to the foreman's rage.

"So Tod done a little play-actin' o' his own. He give out word that he was about to slip his cable, an' fixed it with Slim here to loan him a hoss. With that hoss he went to Spook Hollow the next night. While he was gone the bank was robbed, an' another attempt made to shoot him up a heap! Caspar done the shootin' again while the bandits were covering their getaway.

"When Tod come back he was trailed by the posse an' pinched fer the robbery—which I ain't blamin' the sheriff none for. Things looked right queer I must admit!"

Here the rancher paused as though to gather his thoughts for the final show-down he had planned. Finally he turned to Trop.

"You got anythin' you'd like to say, Trop?" he demanded.

"Not a damn thing!" the man growled. "Somebody's done a heap o' talkin' a'ready!" With the last words his fiery eyes turned full upon Caspar, and the man quailed under the glare.

"How about you, Goud?" Rogers snapped.

"Nothin' to say; you're doin' a right fine job o' the talkin'. Provin' ain't goin' to be so easy, though!"

"We'll take care o' that!" Rogers promised heartily. "Tod got some o' the money that was stole at the bank right outa Trop's saddle bags, an' Caspar admits that money was comin' back to him to pay saloon expenses; the saloon ain't never made a dollar since they opened it!

"So, gents, the sheriff here is arrestin' Trop an' Caspar for what they done in tryin' to kill Tod, an' for robbin' the Salvation bank."

"Which is plumb howsomever!" the officer agreed. "You two coyotes are pinched plenty!"

"The rest o' the gang goes along on the same basis," Rogers said. "All but Goud an' Dave Gaard—the ghost!" He laughed aloud as he mentioned the last words. "We'll be sittin' in on a little private talk with them gents right now!"

The sheriff motioned to several of his posse, and Trop, Caspar, and the others of the gang were promptly placed under guard and given fair warning of their fate should they attempt the slightest trick on the ride to Salvation jail. Tod watched as they filed out into the fading day. It seemed to him somehow that the coming darkness must fall like a curtain between Nan and the trials that were so rapidly coming to a close.

When the room had been cleared but for Slim, Barton, Rogers, Goud, Gaard, and the lovers, Rogers walked toward his foreman and glowered down upon him. The others listened, a little awed, as he spoke:

"I reckon there ain't a thing that we

kin say to each other, Goud! You know what I'm thinkin', an' I don't care a damn what you're thinkin'! But there's this that I'm goin' to say fer the benefit o' the others; I admit you fooled me plenty! I admit I was a maverick, an' that I stampeded when you waved a blanket, but I done it fer my little gal an' fer Tod, the lad she'll marry plenty soon!

"All that's gone by now, except what it's goin' to mean between you an' me! We'll find a way to handle that alone!"

As he spoke the foreman's face went pale and his eyes, now baleful in defeat and lost courage, darted impotently about the room as though in search of some means of escape from what he felt was inevitable.

"But the other folks has a right to know what was back o' all that happened. The riders what stuck to me through thick an' thin', my little gal that was standin' by me the same way when she thought I was mixed up with your rotten gang, and Tod, him that was willin' to risk his life fer me arter I'd throwed him off'n the place like a polecat! They got a right to know a thing of two—and right here is where they learn it!"

He half turned to face the others then, and his manner was that of a man who meant to square an obligation that he long had recognized, and only now could fulfill.

"About six months ago," he said evenly, "this Bram Goud come to me an' says he has discovered the old claim that was known to be out in Spook Hollow. Everybody knowed there was an ol' prospector who got a heap o' gold outa there once an' then was scalped by redskins, his secret dyin' with 'im! I fell for it, an' promised I'd lend money on shares if Goud would show me the claim. That was just what he wanted. I'm a rancher; I don't know nothin' about minin'.

"He took me out to see the claim, an' showed me a salted sluice up by the waterfall. I fell hard again, an' agreed I'd lend the money. Just about the time we're set to return to town an' strike a deal, this gent shows up!" He pointed to Gaard.

"Goud pretends to git excited over the loss o' his secret, an' accuses me o' havin' fixed it with Gaard to trail us. We all got pretty well worked up, an' Gaard goes fer his gun to salivate me. I draws on him an' cuts loose. Down he went, an' right quick Trop an' Caspar come runnin', sayin' they was passin' through the Hollow an' heard the shots.

"Goud says I killed this Gaard—an' heaven knows he did look like a dead man! Then him an' these other two pretend they is old friends just met up again, an' they agree to finance the gold claim without me an' tell me that if I tell anybody about it, they'll all swear against me fer killin' Gaard in cold blood!

"It was a right pretty scheme, an' they decided to open that saloon in town an' remain close at hand to protect Goud while he was workin' the claim. As long as they was there nothin' could happen to Goud through me 'cause it would be two ag'in' one.

"I thought o' Nan an' the Loop K an' I reckon I turned yellow. I couldn't think o' disgracin' the name she had an' I'd given my life to buildin' up!

"It wasn't long before Goud told me the claim had run out an' he was broke an' wanted a job as foreman here. I had to give it to him with them two hellions hangin' in town to ruin me if I refused. Things just drifted along after that, gents. Each time I gave in to him it was easier to give in the next time."

"Then you thought you'd killed Gaard, eh?" Tod queried in steel-like tone. "An' they kept you thinkin' that, an' then sent fer the rest o' their gang, an' planned to rob the bank an' plunder this ranch at the same time!"

"That's about it, Tod," Rogers grumbled, his eyes shifting again to Goud. "S'pose I'd done just what I wanted to do, pull iron on these crooks an' shoot 'em to hell, what would that have done to Nan? This ain't the West it was twenty years ago! Even if I'd got clear arter the shootin' Nan would 'a' been disgraced. A man sees those things arter he gits older—an' I had to be both mother and father to the gal."

"I reckon I can unnerstan' how it was, John," Tod said softly. "I'd rather give everythin' on earth than cause Nan mis'ry!"

"They was a bad gang, too!" Rogers amplified. "They planned the whole thing from start to show-down. Goud even slipped wads into my six-gun afore that fight with Gaard! Caspar told me the whole yarn 'cause he claims that Goud was cheatin' him on some ol' job they had pulled off up north a ways."

"There ain't any sense in talkin' too much about it, John," Tod said, sensing the cost at which Rogers admitted his fears and weaknesses. "I reckon things like these might happen to any gent. Right now, looks like the best thing we can do is to turn these two over to the sheriff an' start all over again."

Rogers strode across to Tod with his hand extended.

"We got a shake comin', son," he said earnestly. "I reckon you're about the best friend a man ever had, an' I know you an' Nan is goin' to tie up so's you'll soon be my son. I'm damn proud an' happy to say it, too!"

Tod accepted the hearty hand clasp and Nan darted to them and kissed them both, tears of happiness glistening in her eyes.

"I'll be breakin' out a few o' the boys an' chasin' that posse to turn these crooks over to 'em," the rancher said, and turned toward the door. "When the town hears o' this you'll be the hero I know you are, Tod!"

"Hero hell!" Slim Willett grumbled. "All he done was git me shot at, starved, an' thrun in that damn calaboose so's he could go ridin' in thuh hills! Ain't I got some supper comin' my way?"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RETURN OF JOHN ROGERS.

NAN and Tod remained in the big room alone after the rancher and the others had left. The place seemed engulfed in a tremendous silence after the stirring scene which had just been enacted; such a silence as gripped them both and made the voicing of their emotions seem almost a sacrilege. Finally Nan slipped again into the arms of the man she loved, and looked up into his face.

"It is all so wonderful, Tod," she said simply.

"Gee!" he answered, folding his arms about her and drawing her close. "There never was anything so wonderful, honey. But somehow, I feel like—well—like everything had just ended!"

"Not ended, dear," she corrected him softly, "just starting. Our happiness lies before us, Tod, such a happiness as I have dreamed of throughout all these terrible months, the only happiness on earth that could be real, and true, and lasting!" She raised her lips to his, and he kissed her gently.

"I'm right content," the man said slowly. "I never felt like I do now. I dreamed about it, too, Nan. Even when I was out fightin' Trop on that shale ledge, I dreamed about it. I reckon, mebbe, that's how I beat him off, honey. When I looked back over that cliff an' felt my boots slippin' on the crumbled shale—I thought I would lose you if he beat me."

As though memory of that fight and its possible results struck horror into her soul, Nan crept closer within Tod's arms, and snuggled her head against his shoulder. He patted her with his hand, neither speaking the flood of emotion which gripped them.

"It's all over but happiness, Tod," the girl said again. "When I try to realize all that those few words mean—I tremble!"

"I reckon I'll get my job back, anyhow," Tod laughed boyishly. "An' then I can come back to the old Loop K an' allus be right handy when you're around, Nan!"

Presently they went onto the low porch, and looked off toward the west where a darkening sky was silhouetting the gaping jaws of Spook Hollow. His arm remained about her as they gazed, each wrapped in thought, each doubtless reviewing all that had happened, and all that might have happened.

From a corral not far away a calf bawled for its mother, and the sound jarred raucously upon the silence of approaching night.

"I reckon I got so much I want to say that I can't think where to begin," Tod said.

"I have the same feeling, Tod," the girl responded. "Dad will be back soon, I'm sure. There could be nothing more appropriate than that cookie should prepare one of the real old suppers we used to have, and then, to-night, dad and you will go to the bunk house and play cards with the boys."

"A great idea, Nan. You got a head on them pretty shoulders, I'll say! I reckon there won't be any time lost in fixing up the things that Bram Goud ruined. There's fences to repair, cattled to be shifted around the range, calves to be branded; the place kinda went to pot under his orders. It 'll take time an' work to put 'em right. The boys 'll do it soon enough, but they certainly have stuck to us through the whole mess, an' I'd like to stick by them!"

"Leave that to dad," Nan answered confidently. "He won't take long to adjust those matters!"

The girl went into the house to issue orders for a late supper. Tod walked slowly toward the bunk house, a calm happiness gripping him as he went, assurance as to the future well established in his mind. He puttered about the place with the inconsequential attention of a man who derives joy simply from proximity with ordinary objects which time had taught him to love.

Darkness had fallen when he rejoined Nan on the porch, and he smoked cigarettes and talked with her until the sound of hoofs in the distance told them of the return of the riders. They found the party of men exuberant with the success of their trip to town and back.

Nan pinched his arm suddenly when it was discovered that Lem Stagg had returned with them. In addition to his duties as owner of the hotel and dance hall, Lem was also justice of the peace. The significance of that did not occur to Tod even when Nan thus signaled her own suspicions regarding it.

Rogers led the way into the house, and announced happily to the riders Nan's plans for the coming meal. Slim lingered long enough to vouchsafe the opinion that it was high time they got something to eat, then joined the others in the rush for water buckets and towels.

Once in the room Tod approached the rancher on the one matter that lingered in his mind.

"Boss," he queried, "I'm askin' if Bram Goud got as far as havin' those partnership papers finished up?"

"Tod," the rancher admitted, "he did!"

"They was all signed and fixed plenty?"

"They was all drawed up an' ready to sign, Tod. I admit again what a fool I was, but I couldn't see any other way out o' the mess!"

"What's to be done about it, boss?" Tod asked.

"I kinda think I got the whole thing hawg-tied, finally, Tod!" Rogers said in evident satisfaction. "That was one o' the reasons I made that hurried trip to town with the sheriff; that an' the fact that I brought Lem out here with me this time all has to do with them darn papers. That was a great idee that Bram Goud had!"

"As long as they ain't signed," Tod qualified, "I reckon no great harm is done, boss."

"Well, they are signed—partly. I signed 'em up."

"Ain't Bram signed 'em yet?"

"Nope."

"Then I reckon he won't git a chance to," Tod laughed.

"We have seen the last o' that coyote around here," Rogers said in relief. "He'll take a heap o' sentencin', that gent. The loot from the bank was found in that blanket you rolled up an' brought in, too. But the sheriff says that tracin' Trop an' Caspar has brought two other robberies to light, an' this same gang did 'em both! They'll all spend a long, long time in a quiet place!"

"I'm right glad to hear it," Tod averred.

"An' now," Rogers said simply, "I reckon Lem has heaps o' business to tend to, an' can't waste too much time on ours. We'll come back to them partnership papers. As I said, I've already signed up an' if you're willin' to tie up with as big a jackass as I am, we're ready fer you to sign up, too!"

"Me! You mean—" Tod gasped. Nan had come to him again, and it was from her that he learned the truth:

"That's why I wouldn't tell you much when you first came in with Trop," she smiled. "Daddy told me he was going to do this, and I wanted you to have a pleasant surprise."

"Well, I sure got it!" Tod cried. "Imagine me a part owner in the Loop K! Gee! But it's too much, boss—it ain't right!"

"Anythin' that's good enough fer my Nan is good enough fer the Loop K or fer me—or fer anybody on earth, Tod," Rogers answered warmly. "I reckon you'll be a partner in the fam'ly soon, won't you?"

"Witnessin' papers ain't the only duty a justice has, Tod," Lem Stagg winked.

Tod felt a pressure on his arm, and looked down into the face of Nan. What he saw there prompted him to sudden action.

"Lem, I reckon you might be marryin' us just as soon as the signin' up is done!" he said.

"I reckon I might—if the gal is willin', Tod."

"She is more than willing, Mr. Stagg!" Nan announced frankly. "I'd just love to make this supper a wedding celebration!"

"Here's the papers," Stagg grinned. "An' with all the work you folks has laid out fer me, I reckon we better be startin' to business!"

The signing of the papers which made Tod Jennings a full partner in the great Loop K was a ceremony which took less time than its importance warranted. Tod could scarcely credit the fact that a simple scrawling of his name meant such vast good fortune to him.

After the men had shaken his hand the entire assemblage filed into the long, low dining room where Rogers saw to it that their appetites were whetted with the best that the day offered. The rancher made a speech, Tod made a speech, and Nan made a speech.

Immediately after the meal they gathered again in the living room, and there, in the hush that characterizes mighty events, Tod and Nan were married by the heavy-voiced, earnest Lem Stagg.

It was when honors for the occasion were being allotted that Slim Willett once more expressed his opinion. Tod turned to the man and asked him to "stand up" at the wedding.

"Tod," Slim avowed earnestly, "I been through ragin' hell fer you sure enough! An' the more I think about it the more I reckon that whatever you do turns out right fer you an' wrong fer me! I'd like right well fer to do this thing, Tod, but I'm plumb scared. It's shore to work out raggedy fer me. Fust thing I know, if I prance into that there line an' face Lem, I'll be the gent what comes out o' this fracas with a wife to support, an' you'll fan away with the ranch!"

Shouts of laughter greeted the sally, and Slim took his place at Tod's side. His prognostication proved wrong. Tod was the one who left the affair with a wife to care for, and the beam of joy on his face sufficed to announce his satisfaction with the burden.

When all was over Slim wiped his brow in mock relief, and Rogers, tears clouding his eyes, but a great smile wreathing his lips, spoke:

"Well, Slim, I reckon that was right hard work fer a gent like you. You oughta be well paid fer it, an' if my new pard is willin', I guess we'll just tell the gang that you're the new foreman o' this place. How about it?"

Then it was that Slim's popularity received its just announcement. Tod immediately hurrahed his approval, and the others joined in a chorus that made Slim's face burn with pride and happiness.

"What do you think o' that, Slim!" Tod challenged jocularly.

"I was just thinkin'," Slim answered lugubriously, "that if it wasn't fer you, I bet I'd got that there partnership!"

And before the laughs had died away Tod and Nan had slipped from the room, out onto the porch, and thence toward the cottonwoods that skirted the south corral. Overhead, the moon was offering its first rays, and the desert night was soft with the croon of a prairie breeze, silent with the immensity of the open places.

THE END

The Desert's Master

By JOSEPH T. KESCEL

"SHOOT if you've got to, Tom!" Calling out loudly, little, gray-bearded Abner Caldwell, with bated breath, watched old Yuma Tom, who, cocked rifle held at his hip, faced a snarling mountain lioness. Her ears lay back, her mouth half open, with lips curled away from gleaming teeth, her lithe, muscular body set for a spring.

They were just inside the door of old Abner's cabin, old Abner himself standing on the far side of a roughly made slab table, his gaze riveted on the half-naked little redman and the crouching lioness, her long tail slowly waving to and fro.

She was a big beast, measuring fully nine feet from her nose to the tip of her tail, and what she could do with a sweep of her paw Yuma Tom well knew.

Warily, his coal black eyes holding those of the great cat, Yuma Tom shifted a little the muzzle of his rifle. Then he cooed something low and musical in his own tongue, and much to Abner's relief the puma at once looked less menacing. Her ears straightened, her mouth closed, and the muscles in her big body relaxed.

Seeing that his pet had calmed down, and that she probably would not now take the offensive, Abner called to her soothingly, "Sally Caldwell, you behave yourself. Where's your manners, anyhow? You actin' thataway to a guest of ourn! I'm sure ashamed and surprised at you."

Then he went on to the old redman, who still stood with his rifle at his hip.

"Reckon she's all right now, Tom. Your Injun words must have charmed her. Or else from 'em she remembers how it was you that brought her here as a furry little mite—a pet fer me. Do you s'pose what you cooed to her waked up memories, Tom?"

"Um. Maybe so. For they same Apache words I say to her after one of my red brothers shootum her mother, and I talkum sweet to little, fuzzly, wiggly, scratchum spitfire.

"But what make her act so mad now? She no actum same when I come here other times, as she grow up from little thing to big puma."

"It's her kitten, Tom.' She's got it under my bunk there. Another darned, fuzzy thing like Sally was when you gave 'er to me for something to amuse myself with.

"An' she insists on keepin' it under my bunk. Reckon as how I've carried that kitten outside nigh onto as many times as I'm years old—and that's sixty. But no sooner am I headed for my tunnel in the mountain there, or doin' something else, then Sally totes it back in again.

"At first I tried closin' the door to keep 'er out. But I soon tumbled that wouldn't do, as she just springs up to that hole I've got under my cabin roof—the kitten held by the nape of its neck in her mouth—and then bounds down inside. I thought of closin' the hole up. But I need some place beside the chimney for the smoke from my darned old fireplace to get out. Might just as well be pestered with the kitten as smoke.

"Besides, Sally has always slept under my bunk—so I reckon as how, to her, it's home. To-morrow, though, I'm goin' to nail some slats up there. They won't interfere with the smoke gettin' out, but they will keep Sally from comin' in."

"Um." Yuma Tom grunted and smiled at his old white friend. "I sabe. But now shooum her under bunk, so that I can talk to you."

"Sure, Tom!" And Abner, coming from behind the table, said good-naturedly as he walked up to his pet, "Here, you, Sally, get back to your kitten! It wants you."

The big cat silently obeyed. Yet when back under the bunk with her kitten, she lay stretched out on the dirt floor, she never for an instant took her eyes off the Indian visitor, who had known the little miner-prospector for many years.

Even back in the days when white men and Apache warred upon each other, the mild-mannered Abner and Yuma Tom had been stanch friends; and about every so often Yuma Tom looked up the gray-bearded paleface, still delving in the earth and hoping to make a stake.

It had been on one of these visits, nearly two years before, that Yuma Tom had given Abner, who was very fond of pets, a kitten mountain lioness, which had grown in semi-captivity into a tawny, sleek-coated creature, now weighing almost as much as the kind-hearted Abner himself.

"I've heard it said, Tom," old Abner chuckled, "that the female of the species is the most deadly. And darned if I don't believe that's right! Especially when they've got young."

"Um-m-m. Yeah." Yuma Tom nodded. "And if that puma giveum me one good swipe with claws on my bare chest or belly, it maybe good-by to this old Injun."

Abner laughed. And for an hour thereafter the old cronies chattered as they ate and smoked. Then Yuma Tom announced that he must be going.

Standing in the cabin's doorway, Abner watched his old friend, astride his great-chested, strawberry roan stallion, Red Gold, ride across the thirty-yard, grassy stretch to a clumps of small trees in the mouth of a cañon. Here both horse and rider were hidden from Abner's sight, and he, leaving the cabin, went up the mountain to his tunnel, where he was soon busy with hammer and drill.

It was a week later that Yuma Tom, walking into Sheriff Bob Hunter's office in the sprawling border town of Calito, found the tall, grizzled sheriff sitting behind his desk and looking very much worried.

"Hello, Tom," Hunter greeted his visitor, absent-mindedly. "I'm glad to see you. Here, have a smoke."

The sheriff got to his feet and held out a long, black cigar.

Yuma Tom took the proffered perfecto, slipped it into his mouth, and then sticking out his hand, grunted, "Shake!"

"Sure! Excuse me, Tom. I was so blamed deep in thinkin' that I clean forgot my manners. And as Hunter grasped the extended hand he more observantly took in his old Apache friend—including the eagle's feather standing up from the

red flannel band around his head, and the bright colored blanket draped loosely about his shoulders.

Generally when Yuma Tom—called by his own people Little Gray Eagle—came to Calito, his dress was like that of the white man. But to-day, as he had come on behalf of his tribe to confer with an official of the government, he had spruced up for the occasion.

The conference had lasted until late in the afternoon, when, his business settled, he had gone straight to the office of his sheriff friend, to find him deep in study.

"You no got to excuse yourself to me, Mista Bob," Yuma Tom remarked, after a searching look at the sheriff's bronzed, honest face. "But what's matter? Maybe I can help my white brother. Injun counsel is sometimes good."

Hunter shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know whether you can or not, Tom. In fact, I don't know whether you'd want to, for it concerns one of your best friends. More than that, a friend of everybody else hereabouts—little old Abner Caldwell—who'd come to town for some grub.

"He was killed about an hour ago; knifed to death by that hulkin' big brute of a Dave Gilwin. It was downright low murder, Tom—and—and now I'm wonderin' how I can keep Dave from bein' lynched.

"The killin' took place in front of the post office, after little old Abner had remonstrated with Dave because he kicked an affectionate pup halfway across the street. It all happened while you was busy with that government *hombre*.

"I managed to get Jake safe into a cell back behind there, as I happened to be in the hardware store next to the post office when the row started. But there's bad trouble brewin' from those knots of men you passed on the street when you came here. All of them agree—and maybe you agree with 'em, Tom—that Dave ought to swing. So that's the reason I'm wonderin' if you would care to give me a hand in this affair. You and little Ab were such good friends."

"Um." Yuma Tom took the cigar from his mouth and slipped it into a pocket under his blanket. Then he thoughtfully thumbed his chin. Finally, though, he asked, looking searchingly up at Hunter, "What do you think, Mista Bob? The big paleface killer ought to be hunged?"

Hunter nodded soberly.

"Speakin' to you unofficial, Tom, I think he ought. But as an officer, I'm expected to protect any prisoner that's in my custody the best way I can, until the law takes its course. Dave is sure to die for his crime, if the law is allowed to deal with him. And I'd like to give our real law—not lynch law—the chance to handle his case."

"Um." Yuma Tom puckered his brows before he asked slowly, "What you do if men come and demand killer? Fightum?"

"Yeah, reckon—if I had to, Tom. Though while it's daylight I'm not so much afraid of a mob's chargin' the jail. If, however, I should go out now and try to get a few of the more level-headed of Calito's citizens to give me a hand I'd come back here to find my prisoner dead. Things are going to happen, anyway, when it gets dark. And that 'll be in less than an hour."

"Um. I see. I see. And when they come, it bad medicine for you. Still you catchum something in mind, uh? Your face tellum me that much."

"Yeah, Tom. You might just as well have it straight. Still, if you don't feel like helping me out, I won't blame you a mite. The idea came to me the instant we shook hands.

"When it gets dark, you sneak Dave out through the back door and take him for me to Fort Bravo. Will you, Tom?"

Yuma Tom answered promptly: "Um. For you, white brother, I do it—even though I think big paleface killer oughta hangum."

"Thanks, Tom. I'm obliged to you," said Hunter gratefully.

Going to the door, he opened it, and then while standing outside on the jail steps, his troubled eyes traveling to right and left, surveyed with deep concern the various knots of talking, gesticulating men scattered along the dusty street.

Up in front of the post office was quite a large crowd, listening to some one who, standing on a box, waved his arms as he talked.

In the performance of his duty along the Southwest border, the grizzled sheriff had faced death more than once. But never before had he been called upon to meet exactly such a situation as this.

The best he could hope for was that the mob would make no move until dark. Yet he thought that as long as he remained in plain sight, either on the jail steps or in his office with the door open, no one would suspect that he had plans to spirit the killer away.

Doing his best to appear unconcerned, Hunter returned to his office and said, as he guardedly handed a key to the little old Indian:

"Tom, this is the key to the jail's back door. Try to have your horse and my horse hid in the brush at the edge of town—waitin' for you and Dave. Soon as it gets dark, you slip into the jail by the back way. I'll leave a rifle, a holstered revolver with a full belt of cartridges, a pair of handcuffs, and a key to Gilwin's cell just to the left of the outside door. When you're ready to leave, rap three times on the door between my office and the cell room.

"There's no use of me tryin' to give you orders as to the best way to get your man to Fort Bravo. You sabe how to do that a lot better than I do. So now *adios!* We'll see each other when we see each other, Tom."

"*Adios,* Mista Bob." And after a handshake, Yuma Tom passed the excitedly talking knots of men as he made his way to the livery stable where he had left Red Gold.

In the same stable was the sheriff's favorite mount, fleet-footed Buckskin Bill. With his prisoner on Buckskin Bill, and he himself astride of Red Gold, Yuma Tom would have bet that no one riding behind them could keep them from reaching Fort Bravo in safety.

But when he found both the livery stable's front and rear doors locked, he saw grave difficulties ahead. The liveryman had most likely locked up his place, to join the scores of men planning to make Gilwin pay with his life for the murder of popular old Abner.

Glancing heavenward, Yuma Tom reckoned that it would be dark within a half hour. If he tried to break into the livery stable, questions that he could not answer satisfactorily might be asked of him. And the organized mob which Hunter would try to hold back until he had received the signal from his old Indian friend was already forming.

II.

EVENING shadows, growing longer each minute, were slowly blotted out by dusk. Then came darkness, and Sheriff Hunter, standing coatless and hatless on the jail's front steps, a cocked revolver in each hand, was warning the menacing, armed crowd in front of him, as he waited to hear the prearranged signal:

"Don't forget yourselves, men! Let the law take its course. Big Dave is sure to swing. And remember, too, I can't give him up to you!"

"You'd better give him up, Bob!" some one called in a friendly tone from the crowd, a dark, moving mass that filled the street from side to side. "We're here after him. And we'll have him—even if we have to do harm to you."

"I tell you I can't let you have him, boys!" Hunter called back, trying by the starlight to see who the men were that stood in the front rank.

Some one from 'way at the back yelled: "Rush him! He's not big fool enough to shoot!"

Instantly the men at the rear started to shove forward. Their weight was too much for those in front to hold back. Inch by inch the mob crowded on straight toward the armed sheriff, who would never give up his prisoner to a mob like this, even if his life depended upon it.

"Keep back! Keep back!" he roared, pointing both his guns at the nearest men. "I don't want to shoot any of you!"

Then, of a sudden, he poked his left revolver into its holster, swung his hand back, jerked the door to, heard it lock, and stepped off to the side.

This was enough for the mob. The sensible sheriff had weakened.

But, "The door's locked, and I won't open it for you," Hunter declared stoutly when he was asked for the key. Whereupon, with little ado, the door was battered in with an ax. And as the leaders of the mob stared in astonishment into Gilwin's vacant cell old Yuma Tom was skulking through back alleys with his prisoner.

Not until Hunter had heard Yuma Tom's signal had he left his post at the door, and when a little later he went to the livery stable and found not only his horse there, but also Red Gold, he wondered what had caused Yuma Tom to change his plans.

By this time scores of determined, armed men were searching every likely hiding place in Calito, while many others formed a cordon on the town's outskirts. If Gilwin had not already been spirited away, his capture was now almost certain.

Little less mystified than the men of the mob as to what had become of Gilwin, Hunter tried his best to persuade the men to go quietly about their own business. But at daylight the search spread to the surrounding country—especially to the hills, where there were so many good hiding places. No one seemed to think that a man in his right mind would head without due preparation into the desert.

Yet there on that desolate great stretch of waste land, with its few low hills, its sand, its age-worn bowlders, and an occasional cactus plant or clump of scraggly brush, trudged side by side old Yuma Tom and his prisoner. The bareheaded, hulking, unnerved murderer rarely made more than a half dozen steps without looking fearfully back over the desert landscape, gradually coming into the full light of the sun, just the upper rim of which showed above the eastern sky line.

Old Yuma Tom was stripped to breechcloth, moccasins, and Apache turban from which the eagle's feather now canted backward. On his shoulder was the rifle the sheriff had given him, while from the full cartridge belt around his waist hung a holstered revolver and a pair of link handcuffs.

He stood out in striking contrast to the stubby-bearded Gilwin—whose face was haggard, whose step was already lagging, and whose checked cotton shirt had been ripped down the front to the waistband of his dusty, dark trousers. His close call from being lynched, and his all-night hike without water, had about done for him.

"Do you reckon they'll search fer me out here, Injun?" he quavered.

"Um. Who can say?" Yuma Tom replied noncommittally. "When I head for desert, I think it our only chance to get away."

Gilwin looked back once more before he asked hoarsely: "And suppose we're spotted, what you goin' to do to help me, Injun?"

"What I tellum you a hundred times already. Try to keep you from lynchers, just the same as my white brother, Sheriff Bob Hunter, would. I give you my word."

III.

For the next two hours, as they made doggedly on straight out into the desert, the sun getting hotter and hotter as it climbed into the heavens, Gilwin kept up his frequent glances to the rear.

Then a new fear gripped him. Was he to die of thirst?

"Say, Injun," he croaked, while plodding across a dusty alkali flat. "When do we find something to drink?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Yuma Tom glanced appraisingly at his prisoner, fast becoming a craven wretch. Then he said: "We findum spring in one hour more. So keep up your heart till then."

True to his word, within an hour the little red man led the way to a spring, a six-foot wide water hole, fed by a trickle which ran from some broken rock at the foot of a low hill in a short cañon.

Without waiting to be told to drink, Gilwin threw himself on his stomach and thrust his sweat-streaked face into the murky water.

"No drink heap much!" Yuma Tom warned, as he stretched himself out on the ground to quench his own thirst.

As if he had been waiting for just this

opportunity, Gilwin made a sudden grab and jerked the rifle from Yuma Tom's hand.

When the old fox, after taking a good drink, raised his head and found the cocked weapon pointed at him, it looked as if his impulse was to smile.

"Stick up your red gun hooks, Injun!" Gilwin ordered hoarsely, wriggling his right forefinger, already through the rifle's trigger guard. "If you don't, I'll blow a hole through you as big as a cat."

Yuma Tom hitched himself around and as he doubled his legs under him, tailor fashion, he raised his hands.

"Um. They up. Now what?" he asked calmly.

"This here, Injun! Just you remember that from now on, I'm the main hombre of this outfit."

"Um." Yuma nodded. "I sabe that. Now what next?"

"Your six-gun, and that belt of cartridges. Just you switch your old carcass around, with your back to me, while I take 'em."

Yuma Tom obeyed without comment, and when a few seconds later he faced Gilwin again, the big white man had the belt buckled on, and besides the holstered revolver hanging from it, there also dangled the handcuffs.

Still sitting cross-legged upon the ground, though his hands were now lying quietly in his lap, the old Apache said almost sorrowfully: "I wish I sabe last night that you wantum pistol and rifle, as they awful heavy. I soon giveum to you as not—'cause it make no difference much who haveum. We just two men on desert—with me know where to find water.

"S'pose you kill me. What then? In few days, sharp-beaked vultures be pickum your bones clean—after you die awful death from hunger and thirst. You could no findum your way back to Calito. For in night, I cross in circle much bad lands to throw trackers off our trail.

"So far as guns is concerned, you can throwum away. Except maybe rifle, with which perhaps we killum game, if we seeum any, when we get to mountains.

"Desert bad place. Yet to old Injun like me there is liveum here. Roots—lizards—snakes.

"After we rest while, we go on and make for Fort Bravo, where soldiers lookum out for you."

"Nuthin' like that fer me, Injun!" Gilwin growled. "We're goin' to rest up here fer a little spell, while I fill myself up with water. Then we're goin' to old Abner's cabin—where I'll git grub and light out for Mexico, you showin' me the way right to the line.

"I know 'bout where old Ab's cabin is, as I was there wunst. I could find it myself all right if I had to, for Pino Peak would be guide enough. We could see it from here, if it wasn't these hills cuts off our view fer the minute."

"Fine!" Yuma Tom agreed quickly. "Old Abner's cabin on way to fort. So we might as well go there. But remember that after you leave mountains, come more desert, no matter which way you go. And I sabe how to master desert. Thinkum heap much before you actum like fool!"

Gilwin, too, knew about the desert which he would have to cross. But once he had food and a canteen, he calculated that he would be safe. And there ought to be both in the cabin.

"So kin I master the desert," he said, gruffly. "And while we're restin' here, I'll slip these handcuffs on you to make you stay put. Just you stick your mitts behind you."

Until nearly noon they rested by the spring, drinking as they felt like it. Then after Gilwin had for the sixth time quenched his own thirst, he ordered: "Fill up, Injun, like I've done, and we'll be on our way."

Unconcernedly, Yuma Tom did as he was told; then rose to his feet and asked that his hands might be set free.

"Walkum heap better," he explained. "For both our sakes, better do as I say."

Gilwin saw the common sense in the suggestion and unlocked one of the handcuffs, letting it dangle by its short chain from the old Indian's wrist.

"Now go ahead of me to old Ab's cabin," Gilwin commanded. "And if you try any funny work, I'll shoot."

The next morning a prisoner and his captor stood in the mouth of a cañon among a clump of small trees and looked across a thirty-yard, level basin stretch at the closed door of old Abner's cabin.

"At last we're here!" Gilwin exulted hoarsely, living over in his mind all that he had gone through since leaving Calito. "I'll handcuff you to one of these saplin's, Injun; then go see what grub is in the cabin yonder."

Had he voiced his unspoken thoughts, he would have added: "And if I find all the grub I want, then it's a finish fer you, Injun! 'Cause I ain't goin' to leave you live and gab."

"Um. All right." Yuma Tom held out his hand and Gilwin fastened the free steel bracelet around the trunk of a small tree that was little greater in diameter than the old Indian's wrist.

The sapling was, however, too large to be pulled out by the roots, and on account of its branches, the handcuff could not be slipped over the top without considerable preliminary work.

The old redman's impassive face revealed none of his thoughts as he watched Gilwin, rifle in hand, walk across the thirty-yard stretch to the cabin door and cautiously open it.

Little if any food would Gilwin find. Yuma Tom felt sure of that, for when he had been there the week before, the supply had been very meager, and Abner had mentioned that he must go to Calito to stock up. If, as Yuma Tom had counted on, everything had been cleaned out, Gilwin would be in the Indian's hands again.

But of a sudden, with the door closed and Gilwin inside the cabin, there came a wild, gasping cry from the big murderer, quickly followed by others and by the sound of the threshing about of two large bodies in a small space. With Gilwin's cries were soon intermingled the savage, spitting snarls of a puma.

In his mind's eye, Yuma Tom saw the whole picture—saw Abner's puma, Sally, her ears laid back and mouth half open, with the first sweep of her paw rip her sharp claws down Gilwin's right arm, making both arm and hand useless and tearing the rifle from his grasp.

Saw man and puma plunge about in the little cabin—sometimes on the floor together, sometimes crashing over pots, pans, the table, the bunk. And always the snarling, spitting Sally pressing her attack with both teeth and claws.

The first thing that Yuma Tom had noticed when within sight of the cabin, was that Abner had nailed up the slats which he had said would be necessary to keep his pet out.

Yet Sally was inside. And now, as the little redman rapidly tried to work himself free, Gilwin's gasps and cries became fainter and fainter. With his arms and hands probably clawed into uselessness, he was doubtless unable to draw the revolver that he had carried all night, and was fast reaching the end of his checkered life.

All was silent in the cabin when Yuma Tom, after stripping off one by one the branches of the sapling, at last slipped the handcuff over the bent down top and turned around. Then he saw how it was that Sally, even though the slats were in place, had probably carried her kitten into the cabin.

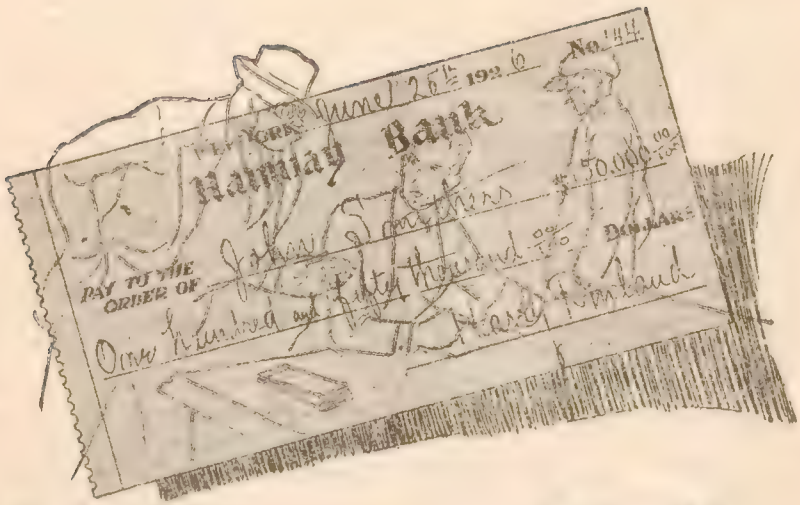
Finding the usual way barred, after little Abner had left for Calito and the door was closed, she had, with the kitten in her mouth, leaped on to the cabin's dirt roof and had then gone down the big, crude, fireplace chimney.

For now, with the kitten held by the nape of its neck in her teeth, she was coming out by the same route.

Three days later Yuma Tom, again with his bright colored blanket around his shoulders, sat smoking in Sheriff Bob Hunter's office, as he explained what had happened and then added that he had given Gilwin a decent burial.

"I'm obliged to you, Tom," the sheriff said with his characteristic drawl. "Just because big Dave wouldn't go peaceablelike to the fort is no fault of yours. And I reckon that Calito folks, now that their mad has cooled off, will feel a heap better to know that Dave died in some other way than by their hands."

THE END



Milking a Million

By JOHN WILSTACH

HOW would you feel if you had been serving a five years' sentence in a bank as a ledger clerk, and suddenly found that a relative had left you a cold million dollars?

Would your heart be strong enough to stand the shock, or take the news as meaning that the million was falling into the right hands?

I suppose every one takes shocks differently, electric or otherwise, and I can merely record my strange and eventful experience. Not figuring that it will do many people any particular good, since unexpected millions are few and far between.

It was on a balmy day in May, and I remember that I was looking forward to a week's vacation, which was due in June. For five years I had toiled as a ledger clerk for the Hanway Bank and this would be my yearly reward.

Did I have any premonition? Nary a premonish. Of course, I knew vaguely that I had an uncle living somewhere in the wide open spaces of the West, where you can look twenty miles on a clear day, if that's any advantage, and men are men, instead of being the animals masquerading as such herded in the East, but I'd never given him any particular thought. He'd never done anything for me, not even sent me a picture postcard.

Just returning from my daily luncheon of ham sandwich and coffee, I was hurrying to be back by one o'clock, for we punched a clock. I rounded into the bank and just in time, and was soon bowed over my books like the slave to routine that I had become.

The head clerk called me.

"Rinland, the big boss wants to see you."

What had I done wrong now? I hoped it was no serious error.

I walked with fear and trembling to the manager's office, where I saw Mr. Thurlow, our second vice president, beckoning me.

He looked cordial, even smiled; or was I only dreaming? Something unusual was up, for he never was in the habit of notic-

ing worms like me. Impossible that I was about to have my salary raised; that never happened in the clerical department until an employee was ready for the old men's home.

"Come right in and sit down, Mr. Rinland. I trust that you have been feeling quite well to-day?"

"Yes, sir," I stammered, blundering into a seat.

He rustled an important-looking document on the desk before him.

"Through our law department I have here a communication from Bison, Wyoming. It seems that a wealthy relative of yours, a Mr. Redland Rinland, has just died, and since he left no will, and you are his only living relative, when the few details of cleaning up the estate are completed, you will receive upward of a million dollars."

If I had been a woman I would have swooned.

"I assume you knew your uncle long and favorably?"

I swallowed my Adam's apple a few times, trying to come to consciousness.

"As a little lad," said I, "he tried to make me break cow ponies, and exercise with an air rifle on the cattlemen. He even had made for me a baby branding iron. But I never took to rough Western ways, so regretfully he sent me East."

I felt myself going out of my mind? This simply couldn't be true. It might happen to some one else—not to me. But I was brought back to the realization that I wasn't in a trance.

"If there is no objection, I trust you will let us handle your account. You are aware, Harry, that we have every banking facility."

Ho! Ho! Being called by my first name now!

Well, I'd put this to the test.

"I find your handling my account quite satisfactory. But the all important question is: When can I start using a check book?"

"We will be delighted to advance you five thousand dollars until the necessary legal formalities, always present, have been gone through with?"

"Can I have it right now?"

"Just as soon as you sign these papers."

I flew to the inkwell. So my signature was going to be worth something at last!

In five minutes I had the five thousand in my pockets, in nice, pretty, crinkly, yellow hundreds.

"Shall we notify you at your old address when the estate is finally settled?"

"No, have me paged at the Ritzmore Hotel."

Not a stop for farewells. I changed as quickly as I could, from my ink-stained working coat, and left the bank a free man—no longer shackled to a desk like a galley slave was once chained to his oar.

I have no idea what you would have done, buddy, but my first move was to purchase a complete new wardrobe, from socks to sky-piece, wave a fond *ta-ta* to my landlady, and take a taxi to the Ritzmore.

The clerk stopped talking to a girl at the switchboard long enough to push the book toward me.

I signed with a flourish.

"Give me the best in the house."

"Certainly, sir. Glad to hear of your good fortune."

"Who told you?"

"Why, it was in all the evening papers."

"Kindly send a flock of 'em up to my rooms. Also order me a couple of best seats for tonight for the Willies musical show, and with the papers send along a box of your best imported Havanas."

At the moment I couldn't think of anything else.

A lordly individual conducted me to what looked like a bridal suite. Wonderful. Only the heavy carpets made me feel odd, being used to the squeaky floors at the boarding house. The place looked like one of those society sets you see in the movies where everybody is at home, but Harold Lloyd.

When a boy arrived with the papers I sent him down to change a hundred-dollar bill. Just like that.

The news of my good fortune was on the front page. It seems my dear old uncle, the sweet, kindly old thing, had been a prominent character in the West, of the old school with notches on both guns and

a terror to the rustlers, who left the State when they heard he was about to arrive in their neighborhood.

The only way he had not lived up to tradition was that he hadn't died with his boots on! Otherwise, he was a regular William S. Hart with a mustache.

I only came in as a struggling clerk who had been discovered after a long, long search.

After lolling around the suite for awhile, changing suits until I might decide which best suited my type of manly beauty, I wondered what I would do next. Gentle reader, I hope your early career was more fortunate, but I was so unused to more than twenty per that I was at a loss how to proceed.

Maybe being a millionaire was a profession in itself that must be learned?

Little did I know that a sudden millionaire, plucked out of obscurity, doesn't have to invent ways to spend his money. There are not only plenty of folks perfectly willing to show him how, but many who scheme to take it away from him by hook or crook—by preference the latter.

I had no idea that at the present hour, shrewd brains owned by men well, but unfavorably, known to the police, thought of me as an easy mark at which to shoot, and were scheming ways and means of milking my million.

The ringing of the telephone aroused me out of a reverie, in which I was breaking the bank at Monte Carlo, and then going on a tour around the world with the Prince of Wales.

"Hello, is this Mr. Rinland?"

"The same," I replied, "and who may this be?"

"Don't you remember your old school friend, Lester Murphy?"

I had so many old school friends I hadn't seen for years that I couldn't quite recall Lester.

"I'm the red-haired boy who always used to give you the worst of it every time we had a fight after school."

"Sure I remember you. It was almost like this new plastic surgery—only ahead of the time—the way you used to change my face. Come right up."

Shortly I was shaking hands with a fine, upstanding-looking chap.

"We'd talk about old times," I said, "but I am trying to forget them."

"Well, that wasn't the object of my visit. I am representing the Florida Andale Improvement Company. We desire to elect you to be one of the officers, third vice president in fact."

I was genuinely pleased. This was a proof that I was coming along in the world. But my vanity was to be short lived. In fact, to die as soon as it was born.

"Of course," continued my old school chum, "as an officer of the company you will be expected to hold at least a thousand shares of stock, at ten dollars a share, so you can have your say at directors' meetings and help shape the policy of the company."

He started to pull some blue prints out of his pocket. I stopped him with a gesture.

"I'm surprised and grieved. Just because I have come into a fortune is no reason that you should think me credulous. I will have nothing to do with your proposition."

"You may regret losing this great opportunity."

"Not if I live to be a hundred. Old school friend of mine you may be, but that doesn't give you any right to invite me to buy Florida land on which you can swim or fish."

Indignantly he bowed himself out. To think I should be taken for such an easy sucker!

In about half an hour, just as I was thinking of taking a stroll along Fifth Avenue, before dining at some place where they overcharged you, followed by a musical show suitable for the deaf, and then a night club where they held you up because you were foolish enough to go in, the phone rang again.

This time it was a man named Burton, the star boarder in the house where I had endured a hall bedroom for years, while he had the first floor front and bath. In winter he had a nice warm gas heater installed by the landlady, while I had to buy a

couple of army blankets to stop from freezing to death. Why, we hardly knew each other, had never even exchanged the usual pleasantries.

He rushed in and grasped my hand as if it belonged to a long lost brother.

"You have a nice place here," said he, looking about the magnificent suite with admiration, envy peering out of his piggish little eyes.

"So, so," I yawned grandly. "Pray be seated."

I nodded to one of those big padded leather club chairs in which you sink in and can hardly get out—or want to do so. There was a long, pained silence. After a long pause it was broken by my caller.

"Rinland," he said, "you know I have always liked you. So I am going to let you in on a good thing. I read of your good fortune in the newspaper this afternoon, and I know you are not the kind of big, broadminded business man to pass anything up. I have a patent on a new stop signal light for traffic, to be used on street corners. This is a great thing. The only thing that it needs is pushing. Now, if you—"

"Then you push it," I retorted hotly. "My cars will be told to go ahead and stop by the hand of honest policemen. Go back to the boarding house, and I hope some day you'll be moved upstairs to the hallroom I occupied for five years."

"So you're only a promoted office boy, after all!" he sneered, and left, slamming the door behind him.

I went to the telephone and told them that I was not further to be disturbed on any account. Why, at this rate I would be obliged to hire an office to keep track of business offers of one kind or another from various helpful gentlemen.

A week later I did that. Just a modest office of two outer reception rooms, and an inner holy of holies, where I could press buttons, dictate to a secretary things of no importance, and, when people wanted to see me, keep them waiting a sufficient length of time to make me seem important.

This may seem, and perhaps was, an example of the pettiest kind of vanity. But it was merely the revenge of the under dog.

When I had first arrived in New York, how many fruitless hours had I spent trying to see this employer and that, and been kept cooling my heels in outer offices?

Besides, one has to have some fun for his money. By this time upward of a million dollars was in deposit in my name in the Hanway Bank, where I had pushed a pen.

Another thing that must be taken into consideration is that the bright lights of Broadway had no lure for me; I had never been in love; business had been my only passion, only up to now I had never had an opportunity to put my finger in the pie.

With an ample margin placed with a Wall Street broker I was able to play the market, which I did in a small way, more to test my judgment than anything else. Also I enjoyed dabbling with things that a man of means, ordinarily speaking, would not pay any attention to.

One day, for example, a poor wretch asked to see me who was working on a new drilling device for oil. He had spent all his money, and said if he could only get to Chicago he knew a man who might help him toward his dream.

I knew what it was to be poor, only too well, so I wrote the man a check for fifty dollars.

He thanked me a thousand times.

II.

THE next day was the first of June, and I received my monthly statement from the bank.

The shock was so great that I almost fell off the office chair.

Not that the first of the month came to me with the same sensation of the end of the world shared by a major portion of humanity. Bills to me were merely a matter of routine.

I was in the midst of going over the monthly statement with my secretary, Bertha, a pretty girl, not at all hard on the eyes.

While I held the statement, she was reading off the amounts of the returned checks. This went along like a drone of figures for some minutes. Other than the sound of her voice mentioning hundreds or thousands for this or that—how different from the old days!—nothing broke the silence. Finally something did—with a bang.

"Fifty thousand dollars," said Bertha.

"Fifty thousand what?" I demanded.

"Dollars, of course."

"Pass me that check. I signed none last month for anything like fifty thousand dollars. What can be the meaning of this?"

I looked over the check with the greatest care. Sure enough it was for fifty thousand dollars—and sure enough made out to the wretched inventor upon whom I had taken pity.

Everything about the check was correct except the amount. Not such a trifling detail!

There was no question of forgery, yet there must be some explanation.

"Bertha, take this check right up to the bank and see if they have any explanation to offer. And hurry back. Yes, take a taxi."

In the meantime I fumed and fretted, as you can readily imagine. A wealthy man doesn't enjoy losing a large sum of money any more than an oculist his right eye.

In half an hour my secretary returned.

"The bank has no explanation. The check was signed by you and properly indorsed. Naturally, they never question any of your checks."

I sat and thought for a long time, it gradually dawning on a slow brain that expert advice on a matter like this should come from a detective—they were supposed to know about all such things. Of course the first agency that came into my mind was one headed by Ex-Chief Commissioner Donaghy, so I reached him on the telephone and asked him to come right over to my office.

He arrived in no time at all—a fine picture of a man, but smoking a cigar as strong as poison gas, one whiff almost knocking me out, so I had him substitute it for one of my best. Then I explained the case to him.

He asked to see the check. Upon receiving it he took out a magnifying glass and examined it carefully. Then he turned to the window and held it up to the light.

"This check has been raised from fifty dollars to fifty thousand dollars."

"How, may I ask?"

"It is very simple. Forgers have a fluid that will rub out ink like a sponge rubs chalk off a blackboard. A clever penman fills in the empty spaces and then an artist with a thread brush draws in the usual hair design on any bank check."

"Then a man can have his name forged, or a check raised, without any particular protection, by any Tom, Dick, or Harry? It certainly is a fine state of affairs."

Donaghy laughed.

"Banks never give out statements of what forgers get away with. It wouldn't be good policy. However, we catch most of them in the long run. The best of them are behind the bars, and we are on the trail of the rest. They never operate for long. However, what you would like to know, I fancy, is how you can stop your name being used wrongfully. Well, if you can think of a method you will be doing something of great benefit to the public."

"Hang the public," said I; "the only person I'm thinking of protecting is myself."

"You can't very well have every check sent to the bank by a trusted employee."

"No, that wouldn't be practical."

"Think it over. Maybe some bright idea will come to you."

"It has been known to happen," I laughed.

After his departure I sat deep in thought for some time. At least I thought I was thinking. I was trying to catch a germ of an idea and let it develop into a first-class plan, but the blooming germ evaded me.

However, I knew well that for every crooked device there is a counter move, just as in wrestling or boxing. It was a puzzle, but I believed it possible for me to figure it out. Having worked in the Hanway Bank as a ledger clerk, I was naturally not unfamiliar with banking, but I had held a restricted position. Not an authority at all.

The thought of solving some way of beating forgers at their own crooked game haunted me.

I would think and do other things, but still in the back of my mind lurked the determination to trick these criminals who lived by their wits and served no honest purpose.

Thousands and thousands of dollars were being spent by the banks, the police, and private agencies every year, to track them down, when all this money might have gone to a better cause.

Banks lost, and so did individuals and corporations. Of course, the criminals were caught in the short or long run and put behind the bars, but why a bank, or a wealthy man like myself could not think up some scheme to catch them right at the receiving teller's window was something that I couldn't understand.

One morning before arising, some few days later, my old bean must have been more open to the doors of brightness than usual. I always had been good at all studies to do with figures, such as mathematics, algebra, and puzzling problems of all sorts.

Anyway, it came over me in a minute, as flashes of genius have a habit of doing.

I jumped out of bed quicker than usual, and was up at the Hanway Bank shortly after it had opened.

The president, a pompous gentleman, with the banker's paunch so well known in the cartoons, greeted me like all good customers are greeted. Details omitted. I asked to be taken into his private office, a request which was granted as quickly as his dignity would permit.

To him I outlined my brilliant scheme.

Naturally, to a conservative mind, anything that varies from the normal doesn't receive much encouragement.

However, a customer as important as myself was one to be humored.

"It is worth a trial," he said; "but remember, Mr. Rinland, if any lawsuit or trouble comes from this you are to pay all the costs and assume all the blame."

"That's all O. K. with me," I replied, feeling just like a kid with a new toy fresh from the shop, "I promise you that nothing will go wrong."

It seems that sometimes a man does something just at the right time. Some Providence guides his hands, or his feet, where both should go; it may be like the mediums—he has an "Indian Guide" in spookland, who gives him advice without his knowing anything about it.

During the next couple of days I certainly was jubilant about my plot to beat any old forger who might be tempted to monkey with me.

Come one, come all, Mr. Forger, of high or low degree, I defy you to do your worst.

III.

Do you ever go to cabarets, or what they call in the wicked city of New York, night clubs? They are all right once in a while, but not as a steady diet, unless persons wish to spend their health as well as their money.

As a gilded plute I venture out once in a while, all dolled up like a bogus Count from Nowhere. I had read this particular evening in the *Sphere* of a wonderful imported dancer who was going to do her stuff at the sign of The Gilded Pig. The hold-up men didn't all die with Jesse James. As the old saying goes, there are a lot of them left who have everything but his horse.

I had gone to the theater with some friends, who had a late engagement elsewhere, so I ventured to the place of open palms—I don't mean plants—alone.

The entertainment waxed on amain, and not bad at that.

Now, gentle reader, as the wee small hours of the night creep on, we must change the tone of this interesting narrative from one of levity to that of melodrama.

For you are going to see your hero very roughly treated by the Apaches of New York, or the Bad Men of Broadway.

I left the place at about two bells, and waited for a taxi. One approached with suspicious quickness, and I jumped in.

It had looked empty, of course, but looks are very deceptive. Before I could get out the door was slammed to, the car started at about forty miles an hour, and two thugs, each big enough to eat Dempsey, jumped

up from the bottom of the car, where they had been doubled over.

They moved toward my corner and menacingly threatened me.

I was pushed back in the seat, none too gently. There is no reason to try to fool you into thinking that I knocked them cold with my trusty right. I did no such thing.

"What is this, a hold-up?" I asked, meekly enough.

"Shut your trap, or we'll knock you on the kisser!" exclaimed one amiable gent, who would have made a fortune in pictures.

"Then what's the idea?"

"We're doing this trick under orders, see, and no sass from you. You'll be delivered at headquarters just as we'd lug a case of moon, so lay to that. Be quiet and we won't have to slam you one."

I decided to obey the orders of these amiable gentlemen.

But I saw no reason why a little smoking should be against the rules.

"Douse the light!" I was ordered, so even that pleasure was denied me.

I don't know exactly how far we rode. Far along Jerome Avenue, I know, and then we turned and I lost my sense of direction entirely.

Finally we stopped at a humble frame building, entirely surrounded by nothing at all but empty lots.

"We get out here, and don't try to make a break, for we are tough mugs, and you only mean a little ten spot for us."

I believed these pleasant stick-up men, and very quietly descended from the machine, walked to the porch of the house, and was none too gently shoved in the front door. It closed behind me with a click, and I found myself confronted by a man wearing large black glasses.

"Come right in, Mr. Rinland; you have been expected."

"Oh, so you know me. I don't think that I have the pleasure of *your* acquaintance."

"That doesn't matter. Come right into the front room."

Following him I discovered two other men also wearing large black goggles. An effective disguise, I must say.

"Now may I ask what is the meaning of this peculiar kidnaping?" I demanded boldly.

"The explanation is very simple, Mr. Rinland," said the one who seemed to be the spokesman. "We have decided that you have altogether too much money, and we could use some of it quite nicely."

"And how do you expect to get it?"

"We know you are in the habit of always carrying your check book with you. You will do one of two things. Either write out a check for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars—and mind you, we know your signature, because we took a tracing from that other little deal, or you will never get out of here alive."

"How long have I to decide?" I asked, trying not to appear eager.

"Until morning."

"I don't suppose, naturally, I will be allowed to leave here to-night, in any case. Well, gentlemen, I value my life more than one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Have you a pen and ink handy?"

"Right there on the table."

I drew out my check book from the pocket of my coat, tore off a check, and then looked up questioningly.

"Make it out to John Smithers. That name will do as well as any other."

"What date is this?" I asked.

"June 25. I hope we haven't scared you out of all idea of time."

I wrote the check out in my natural handwriting and passed it over.

The spokesman took it with a laugh and waved the check to dry it.

"You have showed good sense, young man. Since you have been so docile, we'll let you go upstairs and have a good night's sleep. The window has steel bars and we'll lock the door from the outside, so you'll be just as secure as if you were in a nice little cell."

"Lead me to it," I asked; "but I would like to know just one thing. When do I get out?"

"You'll be driven away in a machine, with the curtains down, and dropped off in some safe spot, just as soon as the check is cashed."

So I was led away to bed, seemingly I

suppose as meek a sucker as these wolves had ever tried to work. After being ushered into a plainly furnished room the door was closed behind me and the key turned. I was alone.

Then I did what might seem to be a strange thing. I very gently moved the bureau over against the door, to form a sort of barricade. I wanted no intruders in the morning—not if I knew it.

This accomplished, I took off my coat and shoes and laid me down to an untroubled rest.

When I awoke I looked at my watch. I had slept later than usual, since it was nearly ten o'clock. Just about time for my little friend with my check for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars to arrive at the bank.

There was nothing particular to do but wait, so I decided to see if I couldn't take a nap. In this way I killed another hour.

Now, however, I'll admit that I was getting nervous. I put on my coat and shoes and paced nervously up and down. What if I had guessed wrong? My life wouldn't be worth a nickel in a fifty-cent limit game of poker.

As time went on I began to sweat a little. Did I say that I was a hero? That was a mistake.

The time had arrived for events to happen.

Suddenly I heard a noise like a house being torn down. There were screams and several pistol shots. Then silence, and more pistol shots. Just like in the movies, help had arrived at the last moment!

All at once it sounded as if bedlam had been let loose.

Sudden silence, then a murmur of voices.

There was a loud thumping on the door. Friend or foe, I thought to myself—on this depends little Willie's precious life?

"Who is there?" I demanded in a voice I tried to make bold and firm.

"An officer of the law."

"A friend in need," I gasped, and pushing the bureau away I almost fell on the chest of a fine, big Irish policeman.

"It is safe for you to come downstairs now, sir, for we have them all."

I descended to the front room where I had signed the famous check. There a strange sight struck my eyes.

There was a group of policemen in more or less disarray, but you should have seen the forgers. They looked as if they'd met Wills and Dempsey at the same time. And they wore pretty shiny handcuffs.

There was one quiet-looking man who pulled back his coat at my entrance, showing a gold Federal Secret Service badge.

"Glad we got here in time, Mr. Rinland. I have a car here and can take you down town."

"Thanks," I said; "just as soon as I recover my breath."

The Secret Service man turned to the police. "Take these birds down to headquarters. The chief will want to cross-examine and sweat 'em out a bit."

The police and the forgers filed out to a waiting patrol wagon.

"Mr. Rinland," said the Secret Service man, "I know you were the direct cause of our catching this slick bunch of forgers, but I wish you'd let me in on the inside workings of this."

"First, tell me what happened."

"Well, their check passer showed up at the bank with your check. They told him to wait a minute, under strict watch of the bank watchman, and in the meantime called a policeman, and placed him under arrest. When he was taken down town he was recognized immediately as a notorious forger and confidence man, wanted both in Chicago and New York. But not as important as his pals higher up.

"So he was promised immunity if he would turn State's evidence and squeal on his buddies. He accepted this offer like a Christmas present and that's how we were able to gather the bunch in. But tell me, how did it happen they were suspicious of the check at the bank? It was in your regular signature and nothing about it looked queer."

He was, indeed, puzzled.

"Well, it is all very simple when explained. I had a code understood only by the receiving tellers at the bank. No matter how genuine my signature looked there was one little item any forger would be sure not to suspect."

"And what is that?"

"The dotting of the letter i. You see my name being Rinland it was easy enough. They would know a check was genuine, for example, if on Monday and Tuesday the letter i in the name was conspicuously dotted at the *left* of the letter. On Wednesday and Thursday the dot was to be seen placed directly *over* the letter. On Friday and Saturday the important dot was to be put at the *right* of the i in my name.

"To-day is Tuesday. The dot should have been at the *left*. I placed it directly *over* the i. They knew something was wrong with the check and so this first bird's arrest followed. Not impossible to beat these forgers, but I'll admit I was worried at the time."

THE END

THE HOME-TOWN PICTURE SHOW

I WANT to see the home-town picture show
That used to be in Allen Martin's store.
The shelves and counters had been forced to go;
And, fitted in, were seats that made you sore.
The canvas screen had wrinkles here and there
And bulging seams that gathered dust galore—
But how we loved those sticky seats to stare,
On show nights in old Allen Martin's store!

The tunes the old piano played were stale,
Six rolls comprised the complete repertoire,
But "old familiars" that could never fail
To bring a cheer before the Civil War.
The films were cracked, and often pulled in two.
Just when Bill Hart some mighty stroke would score;
And breathlessly we waited on the glue,
On show nights in old Allen Martin's store.

'Twas music just to hear the wheezy bum
When in the booth Joe Sykes rewound the reel
To run the first part over just for some
Who chanced to come in late, to square the deal.
For each of us would stay, and shift his seat
To bring the slats to parts not quite so sore,
And see the girl and Bill Hart once more meet,
On show nights in old Allen Martin's store.

These city shows are too high-toned for me—
There's too much plush, and etiquette, and style:
It's not good form to whoop for things you see
That meet your views for hero stuff worth while.
I want to see the home-town picture show,
To ride the slats in agony once more,
With all the boys and girls I used to know
On show nights in old Allen Martin's store.

Charles Sloan Reid.

FAMOUS FEET

..how they're kept free from corns..

GENE SARAZEN'S *Golfing Feet*

"Thirty-six holes of golf a day certainly doesn't drive corns away," writes Gene Sarazen.

"But Blue-jay does. A sensitive toe gets a lot of friction in a day's going on the links. But when a corn appears, I put on a Blue-jay."

In every walk of life, where feet are essential to fame and fortune, Blue-jay is the preferred method for vanquishing corns. A cool and velvety pad fits over the corn and relieves the pressure and pain at once. Then the corn goes —unless unusually stubborn. But even the most obstinate corn seldom needs more than a second plaster . . . . . At all drug stores.

Blue-jay

THE SAFE AND GENTLE WAY TO END A CORN

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DANDRUFF?

Bottle Bacilli, the cause of Dandruff. Illustration reproduced from Hazen's "Diseases of the Skin" C. V. Mosby, Publisher.

Dandruff is a disease difficult to cure, but easy to check. Read below about the best way to combat it.

It's a danger signal!

DANDRUFF is a danger signal. If you have it you should do something about it.

Perhaps you never knew it before, but dandruff is a germ disease. It spreads by infection from personal contact, as with the common use of combs and brushes. Children, for instance, are never troubled with dandruff until actually infected by some contact.

Dandruff is a disease difficult to cure but easy to check. It has a tendency to reappear, unless properly treated and often brings with it the possible loss of hair or actual baldness.

The ideal treatment to combat dandruff conditions is the systematic use of Listerine, the safe antiseptic.

We have received hundreds of unsolicited letters from Listerine users, who are most enthusiastic in their claims for what Listerine will do in this way. If you are troubled with dandruff you owe it to yourself to try it.

Using Listerine for dandruff is not complicated. You simply douse it on your scalp, full strength, and massage thoroughly. The effect is antiseptic, cleansing and healing. And you will be amazed to see how this treatment, followed systematically, combats dandruff.

Moreover, Listerine will not discolor the hair nor will it stain fabrics.

Not only men but women have become devoted users of Listerine for this purpose—women, particularly, since bobbed hair has been in vogue and has made them more conscious of dandruff if it happened to be present.

Try Listerine this way. Used systematically, the results are almost miraculous! — *Lambert Pharmacal Co., St. Louis, U. S. A.*

LISTERINE

—and dandruff simply do not get along together

THE MUNSEY PRESS, NEW YORK